

# ゼロから始める

虎走かける

Illustration  
しずまおしのり

# 魔法の書

# **Grimoire of Zero** ゼロから始める魔法の書

## **Volume 1**

Written by Kakeru Kobashiri

Illustrator by Shizuma Yoshinori


## Credits



LN Published by Ascii Media Works

Translated by [NanodesuTranslations](#)

PDF by swHP

A full-page illustration split vertically. On the left, a large, brown-furred beast with a human-like face and a wide, toothy grin looks towards the right. He wears a dark, patterned tunic. On the right, a young girl with long, light pink hair and purple eyes, wearing a dark hooded cloak, sits cross-legged and eats from a wooden bowl with a spoon. A campfire with a flickering flame is between them, casting a warm glow. The background is dark and atmospheric.

Looking up after confirming  
my course of travel, I froze.  
A hooded figure, illuminated by  
the flickering flame, was—

## Beast Mercenary

A half-man, half beast who dreams of becoming a human.

"Hey, stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"



Instinctively, I  
looked at Zero's lips.  
If I touched hers with mine,  
it would undoubtedly  
be sacrilege.

## Albus


A young sorcerer who  
claims to know the  
whereabouts of the  
Book of Zero.



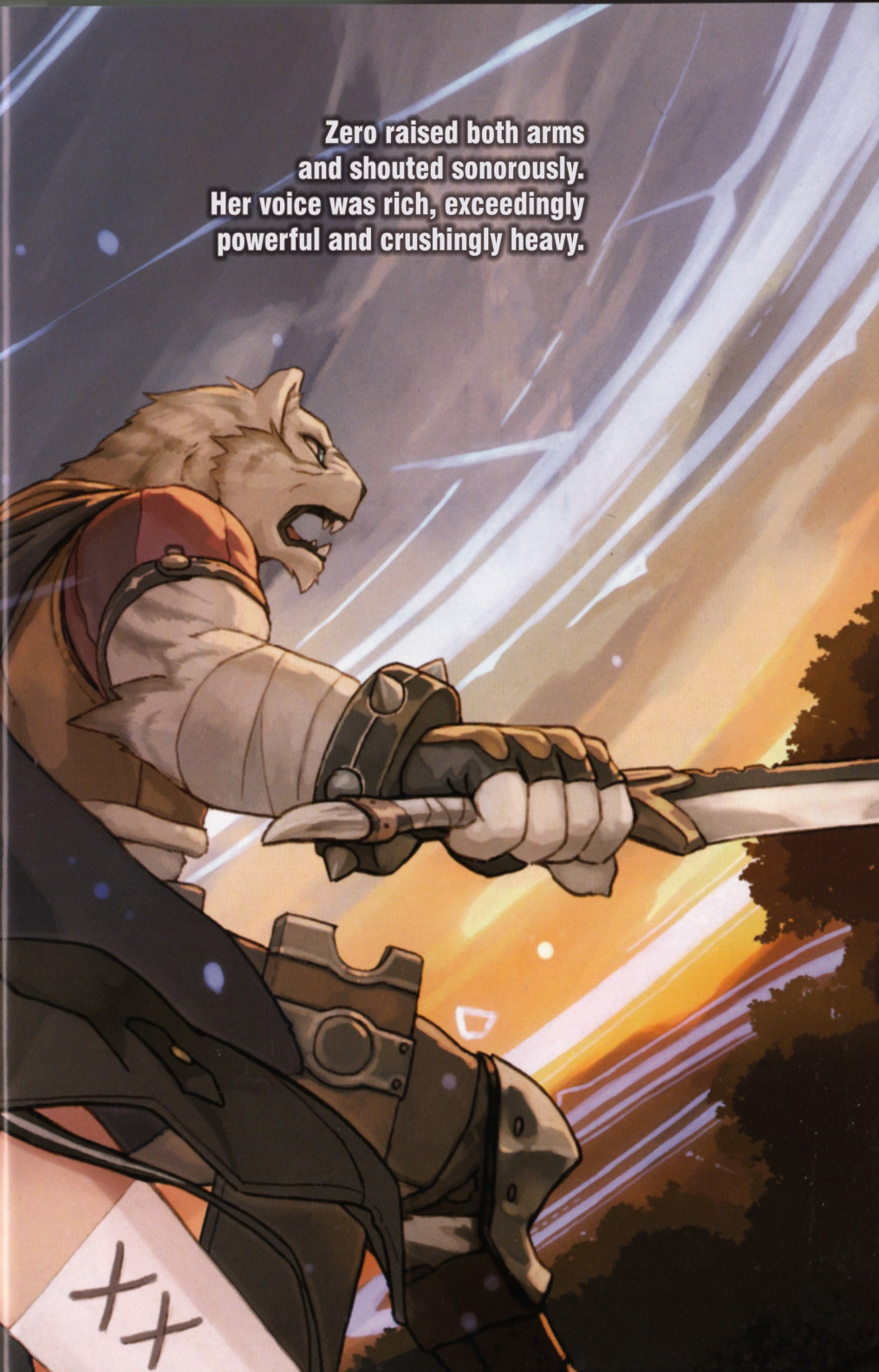
"A kiss? Why do they press their lips  
together? Some sort of ritual perhaps?  
...Would you try it with me, Mercenary?"

## Zero

A witch journeying in search of the Book of  
Zero, and unversed in the ways of the world.



**"O my nameless sovereign of demons. Descend upon the body of this sacrificial beast and hear me!"**



**Zero raised both arms and shouted sonorously. Her voice was rich, exceedingly powerful and crushingly heavy.**

# Prologue

While dusk dyed the world red, something was burning.

As if it were a watchfire, the searing blaze spawned a suffocating column of smoke that pierced the heavens.

The smell of burning flesh.

The words of a prayer being read.

The clanging of a church bell.

The cheering of the crowd rang around the square, with the flame that burned away evil in the center.

From the front of the crowd, I watched the burning witch. While I was cheering at the sight of her sobbing and writhing figure...

"The river overflowed from unbelievably heavy rain. The flood killed many people and washed half the fields away. I hear it's all that witch's fault."

The voices spread from the center of the crowd, from one agreeing, "scary, huh..." to a shrill voice yelling "give my family back, you murderer!" A stone flew through the air, just barely striking the squirming witch.

"It really is scary, huh... I've heard about witches only in gossip lately, but one was actually this close... where the heck was she hiding...? She kidnapped babies to use as sacrifices, right? I heard there was a mountain of corpses in her hideout."

"It's the Knights of the Church who found the witch's lair, you know. They usually look like they're just lounging around, but when it really matters, you can definitely depend on the Church for help. Only god can stop the witches' demons."

At last, the struggling, writhing, and screaming witch ceased to move, her figure a lone shadow amidst the brilliant flames. *Sure serves you right, doesn't it, witch?*

Inwardly celebrating, I smirked.

"Hear me, believers!" the priest who burned the witch and recited the prayer proclaimed.

"Here, we have triumphed over evil! The vile witch who practiced sorcery, summoned demons, and spread terror and chaos is no more!"

"Hooray!" the crowd exulted.

Cheers of “long live the Church!” rang through the air, as the fire flared with the crowd’s enthusiasm.

It was the year 526.

In this world, witches practiced the well-established art of sorcery...

While the emerging art of *magic* was still in its infancy.<sup>1</sup>

---

1 See Terminology for the definitions of the terms “magic” and “sorcery”. They are also given in chapter two.

## **Chapter 1 - The Witch and the Fallen Beast**

# ゼロから始める 魔法の書

一章 魔女と獣堕ち



## Part 1

Today, I said goodbye to the dark depths.

The summer sun was blinding, so I pulled my hood firmly over my head, shading my eyes. Compared to the coolness of the limestone cave, the heat of the outdoors felt suffocating.

I wasn't used to the sunlight.

Still, the sight of clouds drifting across the blue, boundless sky and the comfortable humidity of the forest were refreshing.

*This is the outside, huh?* I thought. It looked just like the sketches in the books, except that nothing could replicate the vividness of these colors, nor all the movement.

Bugs flew. Birds chirped. Animals cantered. I walked along with bare feet and watched. It was comfortable to walk on the moist, fallen leaves. It hurt to walk over the pebbles, twigs, and other debris.

The scents of damp dirt, crushed leaves, and rotting fruit mixed together to form a strangely calming odor which filled the air.

I glanced back at the cave.

The darkness had been cozy and comforting. I felt a little nostalgic leaving, but I'd waited for far too long.

I had finished interminable books, and resolved unresolvable debates. It felt like an eternity passed while I was there. I had thought I could spend an eternity there.

But I was just a bit tired of it all. I could wait no longer.

"I am leaving, Thirteenth."

Having announced my decision, I felt like I had a burden lifted off my chest.

Raising my finger with the palm of my hand toward the sky, I pointed at the entrance of the cave.

The mouth of the cave made a sound and collapsed, becoming a simple pile of rubble.

An image of Thirteenth frowning came to mind. I cackled.

A little while later, while walking through the forest, I came across a small stream. It was the very same stream I had crossed a bit earlier. How curious. How could I run into the same stream when I haven't changed direction even once?

I groaned, and jumped across the stream again. When I turned around to check, the stream I had just crossed was nowhere to be found.

“A barrier? What an unpleasantly meticulous fellow. He knew all along that I would break my promise.”

I had promised to wait. I had planned to keep that promise, but it was his fault for making me wait so long. I'd already had enough of waiting around. I'd waited alone for too long.

*What to do now?* I pondered for a few seconds. Speaking quickly, I slashed my arm through the air.

“The Book of Harvesting, Verse Eight—Kudola!”

Immediately, a thunderous roar reverberated through the air, and part of the forest was blown away.

—A number of days passed...

.....

I often thought that forests at dusk exuded charm.<sup>2</sup>

The rays of the summer sun had softened, and they would dull even further as fall approached.

The forest had been plunged into darkness as soon the sun began to set below the treetops. By the time the gloomy forest was bathed in the setting sun's crimson glow, wayfarers would have finished preparing for the night. They would extinguish their campfires, cover themselves with their cloaks, and wait for daylight to return to the pitch-black woods.

Today at dusk, in the forest with my eyes hurting from the setting sun's glare, I was running for my life.

The charm of a forest at dusk? My life was in jeopardy! Mowing through the bushes and branches in my way, I slid behind a large tree and paused for a moment to catch my breath. Then—

“The Book of Hunting, Verse Four—Redæst!”

The thick tree was blown away, accompanied by the sound of an explosion. I was thrown aside and crashed into the ground.

*Was that an explosive—? Is there a stockpile of odorless explosives somewhere?*

I was being attacked with weapons whose natures I did not understand, so I had no other choice but to keep running.

*Shit, shit, shit!*

---

<sup>2</sup> Just in case, here's a note indicating that the narrator of the first section is no longer narrating this section.

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps behind me, I hurriedly got up and sprinted away while an angry, strangely high-pitched voice cried out. My eardrums were busted because of the explosion, so the sounds of my surroundings were muted. My sense of balance was also out of whack. My knees wobbled with every step I took.

But there wasn't time to rest.

There was no doubt in my mind that I would die if I stopped running.

I would surely be beheaded and skinned, my hide used for decoration. I didn't know if I was being chased by a bandit or someone looking to skin me, but I knew for sure that it wasn't someone to sit down and have a nice chat with.

The muddy, mushy forest floor and snaking tree roots made running difficult. Arrows of pure heat flew past, grazing my cheeks as they impaled themselves into tree trunks and dissipated.

I finally realized what my assailant was.

Oh, dammit, shit—!

“Screw you, witch! Y'all c'n go kill yourselves! I wasn't born to be one of your damn sacrifices!!”

There had been rumors going around that the witches of this country used sorcery that no one had ever seen before.

I had been doubtful then, but if someone had shown me these arrows of light which dissipated upon impact, I would have been completely convinced.

This couldn't get any worse—my adversary was a witch.

That I was able to figure out the nature of my assailant was good and all, but the fact that it was a witch put my life in much more danger. I ran all the more frantically.

Suddenly, my foot caught on something—a tree root.

To make matters worse, there was no ground in front of me—it was a cliff.

*Please at least give me a soft landing. Either that or let me land in a river.*

*Amen*, I prayed to God, who didn't exist either way. I slipped over the ledge and tumbled toward the ground below.

It was fortunate that the place from which I fell wasn't very high up... but it was unfortunate that there was a traveler stirring a pot of stew in my landing zone, instead of a river.

—Really, how unlucky was I.

No, the unlucky one was the traveler I was going to flatten. Robed from head to toe, the traveler looked very slender and frail. I was a giant compared to this person.

*Sorry, please forgive me. I'll dig a grave for you if you get crushed. But only if I got the time to.*

The next moment, I struck the ground and went head over heels as an intense pain erupted from my abdomen.

"A-Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!"

From nearby came a shriek of despair.

It seemed that the traveler had somehow managed to avoid my sudden plunge from the cliff, but had sacrificed her soup to do so. *I'm really sorry.*

Groaning, I was getting up when the trembling traveler grabbed my neck and began shaking me back and forth.

"You bastard!! How dare you waste the soup I stewed myself?! Do you even know how much time it took for me to make that soup?! It's utterly incomparable to that required to roast a wild animal! H-How-How dare yo—!"

"W-W-Wait, wait, calm down! I really am sorry, but this ain't the time to be angry!"

"This...isn't the time? What could be a bigger problem than my soup—"

"Watch out, idiot!"

Yelling, I immediately shielded the traveler with my body, flattening us both against the ground. It was just in time, as bolts of heat once again flew past overhead.

"...I see, so there does appear to be a bigger problem."

"Glad ya caught on so quick. Lets go!"

I slung the wayfarer over my shoulder and ran. I wondered why I was bringing this person along.

"Hey, why are you taking me with you?"

It seemed like the burden on my shoulder was thinking the same thing. *We'd get along, wouldn't we, traveler?* I thought for a moment.

"Just happened!"

I answered honestly. But, in hindsight, leaving this burden behind as a distraction would probably have been the smarter choice.

*Is it too late to change my mind?*

"You... you are being pursued, are you not?"

Without hearing my treacherous thoughts, the weight on my shoulder had finally figured out what was going on. Anyone else would have caught on immediately.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but there’s someone tryin’ to kill me!”

“...What did you do?”

“I didn’t do nothin’! They just want me for a sacrifice—a male fallen beast!” I couldn’t stand the traveler’s disapproving tone, so I quite literally roared.

Fallen beasts were half man, half beast, so-called monsters. Nobody knew why, but monsters with the bodies of animals, just like me, were sometimes born to perfectly normal parents.

Witches desired the heads of the fallen to use them as tools for practicing sorcery. As a result, I was prized by those who wanted to try and sell my head to the witches. Namely, every single crook and shady person there was.

The first attack came when I turned thirteen—in other words, it was my fault that bandits ransacked my village. I was but a weak child then, so I wasn’t able to protect my village from the armed bandits.

I was able to live on, at the cost of three human lives.

So I, like many other fallen, left home and became a mercenary. To escape the ruffians, I had to become one of them. Since then, I’ve fought in the battlefield on the side of desperate country after desperate country.

Mercenaries were warmongers. They were hired by one side of a conflict, and fought to the death with mercenaries hired by the other. Whether it was a war between empires, a skirmish between fiefdoms, or a border dispute between minor clans—it was depressing, but even to the point of being participants in a bloody brawl; mercenaries didn’t lack job opportunities.

Among the mercenaries, the fallen were the best fighters, so they were welcomed in every conflict. Thanks to this, one way or another, they didn’t fit into the rigidly structured mercenary groups, and were able to remain independent.

Rather, it should be said that fallen beasts weren’t allowed to live any other way.

It didn’t matter what country, what city, what village; fallen beasts weren’t welcome. Even the church treated us as vile creatures, so to a normal human, there was no way that we were seen as anything but frightening.

Furthermore, because of the witches’ craving for the heads of fallen, highwaymen had been taking the initiative, luring fallen beasts into ambushes. Still, this was the first time I had been attacked directly by a witch. *Looks like I’ve been pretty lucky so far.*

I had only thought of witches as nothing but malicious puppeteers before, but from today onward, I’ll regard them as real threats.

But for now, I needed to focus on escaping.

*Screech*— a squeal rent through the air; I immediately ducked behind a tree. The bolt of light impaled its trunk, making it crack and topple over.

“Shit—how the hell’s she do that?! Since when could witches use sorcery as semiautomatic crossbows?!”

I had heard that witches were able to do the impossible with sorcery, but this was beyond my imagination. Cursing, I started running again.

I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about witches and sorcery, but everyone knew that witches needed to complete major rituals as part of practicing sorcery. After completing a ritual that took months to complete, a witch would be able to gain powers which could be used to easily destroy a country. There were plenty of heroic tales about the Knights of the Church defeating such witches before they could complete the required ceremonies.

Practicing sorcery required large amounts of time, so witches sequestered themselves in their lairs, relying on their numerous minions for protection while they focused on completing the necessary rituals. —At least, that’s how I had thought it worked.

Nothing I knew of could explain how this witch possessed the ability to run while rapidly shooting bolts of light and, without gunpowder, blow up a large tree.

I was extremely confused. At any rate, I wasn’t going to live long enough to find out how unless I kept running.

“Is that...Staim?”

Unexpectedly, the weight on my shoulder said something.

Ignoring it, I continued to run until it began banging on my head.

“Hey, is there really a need to keep running?”

“Of course, dammit! I’ll die if I don’t!”

“That’s not true. —Alright, let me down.”

There and then, devoid of sympathy, I threw the burden off to the side. It told me to put it down, so I no longer felt any obligation to take it with me. *Farewell, wayfarer. I’ll keep on living.*

I had run only a few steps when I went headlong into the ground once again, this time because of an earthquake.

“Shit...that really hurt!”

Moaning, I somehow managed to look up. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

Shrieking and staggering, the pursuing witch fell to the ground as, swallowing up trees, the earth around her rose up. In an instant, there was a large earthen cube before me.

## Part 2

“How... what the heck is goin’ on?!”

I glanced at the traveler, not expecting to see anything out of the ordinary, but froze in shock.

The traveler’s hood had come off, revealing shimmering silver hair which billowed as if caught in a gale.

—A woman.

An exceedingly beautiful woman at that.

Although my life was in danger, I couldn’t help but recall how light and slender she had been in my arms. She had spoken in a confident, calm manner, but her voice had been too high-pitched to be a man’s. The part of me that was male was telling me that I should have felt her up more, among other things inappropriate for the current situation. What a waste.

But could it be?

This woman—was she doing this?

Besides her, the witch and I were the only ones here.

It was obvious that the witch was the target of the cataclysm, and just as obvious that I couldn’t pull off such tricks. There wasn’t any other way of looking at these facts.

In the blink of an eye, it was over.

The walls had formed a giant earthen box, which looked as natural as if it had always been there, yet stuck out like a sore thumb because of its intimidating presence.

“This is the Book of Capturing, Verse Three—Etraak. It would take a week to escape using something as weak as Staim. Using Edarest would allow her to get out easily, but she looked quite tired. She would need to rest for a while first. Now—would you be so kind as to explain this?”

Her cherry lips curled into a cold smirk. I could see that she had long eyelashes, which barely obscured unnaturally clear, blueish-purple irises that shone like gemstones.

I stayed where I was, mouth agape, staring at her like an idiot.

“You... you’re... a witch...?”

The woman turned to face me. As I expected, she possessed fear-inducing beauty. But, from the confident look that replaced her smirk, I could detect immaturity and innocence.

It was as if she had become a different person.

“Certainly—I am a witch. A witch of the Murky Black who extracts meaning from meaninglessness, and conjures forth something from nothing!”

*Oh. Right. I see. Got it.*

Without further ado, I got up...and ran out of there as fast as I could.

.....

If there were one good thing about being born a fallen beast, it would be that my physical abilities far surpassed those of normal humans.

If I were to run at full speed, no one would be able to catch up. If I were to get into a fist fight with a normal human, he would die and I would walk away unharmed. This was the perfect body for fighting.

It seemed that I’d managed to lose the witch.

I raced through the forest, following a trail of bare dirt cutting through the grass. Breathing heavily, I hid behind a tree and warily scanned the woods in the direction from which I came. The forest was enveloped by darkness at this point, but I couldn’t sense anyone in pursuit. However, I couldn’t let my guard down just yet. After confirming that I was indeed completely safe, I breathed a sigh of relief and slid down into a sitting position with my back against the tree.

*Seriously—what a disaster that was.* I looked around for danger one last time, and began setting up camp in the dim moonlight.

Even if a witch possessed unrivaled beauty, she would still be my worst enemy. Even if I were so enthralled by a witch’s beauty that I wanted to *let* her kill me, my instinct for self-preservation would still be stronger than my sexual desires. In any case, no one would grieve over the death of a fallen beast. I was the only person who would mourn my death.

The fallen were disliked throughout the world. Of course, the primary reason was that our appearances were strange, but because the majority of fallen beasts became mercenaries and bandits, we were essentially murderers. If I were a human parent, I would do everything I could to prevent my child from approaching fallen beasts. “Don’t come into our villages, our shops, our sight—.”

Ultimately speaking, there wasn't a single ally of the fallen beasts on the planet.

I was lucky to be a mercenary because I never had to worry about having enough to eat, but having to take the lives of others, whether I wanted to or not, bothered me.

All I wanted to do was to open a small bar somewhere, settle down with a lovable woman, and live a leisurely life until I died, but... unfortunately, the world wasn't going to allow me such pleasures.

"With my looks..."

Sighing, I looked contemptuously at my fur-covered hand.

Most fallen beasts had bodies of large, carnivorous animals. Many possessed the bodies of bears and wolves, but I didn't know what animal I was. It was probably some feline, even though it would be too cruel for me to be a cat. My fur was white with light black stripes, although the white mostly won out over the black, creating a complex pattern. I was fairly certain that this was just an idiosyncrasy, but it made me stand out at night, so I used my black cloak to cover myself.

"Well, at least it looks better than havin' no pattern at all."

In an effort to cheer myself up, I forced a smile.

I was turning introspective, but in my youth, I had brooded over this to the extent of cutting myself and watching my blood well up. I had pondered until, eventually, it had hurt too much and I had been forced to give up. This had taken place right after I left my village. I had been living on a deserted mountain while covered in blood, eating birds and mice to sustain myself. I may have been able to reflect on my own nature because of that experience.

Anyhow, I was a monster, and no one would pity me if I perished. I would at least be motivated to live on if someone pitied me even the tiniest bit.

More than ten years have passed since then, and the wounds of that period have completely disappeared. Even the devastating loneliness I had felt has faded due to all the hardships I have endured since—no, the loneliness has only dulled.

At any rate, living alone was fun. Besides, there might be a woman in the world with strange enough tastes to reciprocate my love. I could only hope. I didn't believe those stories about even harlots refusing to provide company to fallen beasts, but—

"If only I'd been born just a bit cuter of an animal..."

For instance, although I didn't know if there were fallen beasts with bodies of cute wildlife like rabbits, they would certainly receive better treatment than fallen like me, who had the bodies of carnivorous beasts.

I stirred my soup and worried over things I couldn't do anything about.

I accidentally left behind the rabbit I had killed before the witch started chasing me, so I had to make a soup out of herbs I found nearby and some dried meat I saved for emergencies. I sprinkled some salt into the pot, and put in a chunk of animal fat that I had kept, wrapped in leather, in my bag. After tasting the soup, I added another pinch of salt. *Hmm, I guess this is as good as it'll get.* It just had to simmer a little while longer to let the flavors mingle properly. I rummaged through my bag and took out a compass and a map, which I unfolded on my lap.

**—Map of the Wenias Kingdom, Revised Edition—**

*Many merchants go to the city of Foamicaum to sell their goods. There, one can find luxuries from around the world.*

*In the imperial capital of Prasta, there are performances in the city square every week on the day of the goddess.*

*Specialty: Roasted Ebru boar (A giant boar native to Wenias). Its flesh is tender and succulent.*

*Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods. Hunting them is forbidden. Always stay on the road.*

Reading the last line, I frowned.

“I’m not in the woods ’cause I wanna be, so gimme a break, eh?”

Speaking to no one in particular, I attempted to determine my current position from the positions of the stars and the point on the map where I was attacked.

The Wenias Kingdom was located roughly at the center of the continent. It was formerly an isolated state surrounded by a mountain range, but by tunneling through the mountains, they were able to secure trade with neighboring countries, and successfully attracted numerous travelers and merchants.

The mountains were so difficult to cross that no matter how high the toll for entering Wenias was, travelers would pay up to use the tunnels. The underpass was unimaginably massive, and had so many inns that they were practically situated storefront to storefront. Here and there in the pitch-black tunnel, variegated colored lanterns lit up the surroundings and inns, which made such spots look like dreamscapes. If I were a child, there would be no doubt that I’d have been extremely excited. But nowadays, there was a rumor going around that the Wenias Kingdom was dealing with just a teeny tiny problem.

With the kingdom going through tough times, thievery was running rampant. Starting with the merchants, travelers began to avoid this country, because getting caught in combat would mean endangering their lives.

As a result, Wenias, which was built on revenue from wayfarers, was heading toward collapse. Of course, the kingdom's higher-ups dedicated themselves to solving the problem. The first thing they did was strengthen their country militarily—by hiring mercenaries. This information spread both inside and outside the kingdom, and reached the ears of mercenaries like me.

Such being the case, I was heading toward Prasta, the imperial capital of Wenias, to seek employment. According to the border patrol, the main force was to consist of fallen beasts, so I was ordered to take my letter of introduction and go to the capital, though this was fairly bothersome.

There were a great number of endemic species in Wenias, so to avoid their habitats, I had to take a winding path through the countryside. Owing to that, I couldn't part with my map. I traced my finger over the parchment, which was worn out from countless rewrites. From the path where I initially set up camp, through the woods to the path I was on now, that would mean Prasta was—.

"Thataway, hm?"

Looking up after confirming my course of travel, I froze. A hooded figure, illuminated by the flickering flame, was using a wooden ladle to drink my soup.

.....

"AAH!"

As one would have expected, I screamed. Normally, I was extremely aware of my surroundings, even for a fallen beast. Nothing had ever successfully snuck up on me before. But even with my superior senses, I had been completely oblivious to this person's approach. On top of that, it was the same exceedingly beautiful woman from earlier—in other words, the witch. To make matters even worse, she was eating my dinner. I wasn't sure which of these things upset me the most.

"Hey! Stop helpin' yerself to mah soup!"

It became clear, from what I blurted out, that I was most concerned about my soup.

## Part 3

As I snatched the pot away from her, the witch made a distressed sound.

"G-Give that back! That's my dinner!"

"No! This is my dinner! Mine!"

“You knocked over my pot of soup earlier, didn’t you?! Giving me your soup in return is the noble thing to do!”

“There’s nothin’ noble in helpin’ out a witch!”

“Fine then! If you are not going to hand over that soup, then I will have no choice—but to use sorcery!”

I had no response to that threat. *That’s right, my opponent is a witch after all. I shouldn’t be trying to protect my soup, I should be retreating with my sword raised!*

“Listen carefully. If you do not give me that soup right now, I will cause a famine in the north, a plague in the south, a rat infestation in the west, and the death of all wheat crops in the east. The world will be destroyed unless you hand that pot to me this instant!”

What a witch.

But, for some reason, I wasn’t afraid.

I was used to malice, animosity, and bloodlust, and noticed immediately if those feelings were directed toward me. So if I didn’t consciously recognize the danger, I would still unconsciously reach for my blade. Since I wasn’t frightened in the least, I surmised that this witch was all bark and no bite.

I laid aside my worries.

“Do whatever ya want.”

I chose my dinner over the world. As long as nothing happened to me, I couldn’t care less about the world. Just like how if I were to die, nobody would think twice about me. I snatched the ladle out of the flabbergasted witch’s hand, and began to greedily gulp down my soup.

“Waah! Waah! D-Do you even know what you’re saying? Even a demon would take this more seriously! Hey! Don’t drink all of it!”

“Stop buggin’ me. You’re gettin’ really annoying!”

After I shook the witch off my back, she slumped onto the ground. An unnatural silence descended, and I stopped slurping my soup to look at her.

It was strange, how she lay on the ground without moving even a hair.

*What if she’s dead?* It would be great if she really were dead, but even so, I felt bad for her.

“...Hello?” I timidly called out.

“—I too”

A muffled voice responded. So she was still alive. Not only was she alive, but an ominous and unearthly aura emanated from her body.

*Did I mess up?*

I couldn't sense any danger, but I was dealing with a witch. I didn't know what she'd do if I angered her. I shivered and readied myself—

"I want some too..."

I felt the adrenaline drain out of me.

It was more of a pleading voice than one of anger.

What was this? Why did she sound like she was being mistreated? In combination with her raggedy robes, she looked pitiful. Was *I* the bad guy here?

"I'm so hungry... I worked all day to make that soup... I... I was looking forward so much to tasting it... I even woke up at sunrise to start preparing..."

The witch whined and pawed at the ground.

I felt guilty when she said that; I truly was sorry for ruining her hard work.

I was being hunted by a witch at the time, but that still didn't excuse how I had ruined her dinner. She had even saved me nonetheless. If I didn't give her a bowl of soup in return, then I would be no better than a mere animal.

"That soup you made was so tasty... I want to have some too..."

*It was tasty, you say?* I couldn't deny her any further. I was actually quite proud of having made the soup so quickly.



Clicking my tongue, I filled a bowl with soup and held it toward to the witch. I had lost.

Although her face was obscured by a hood, her expression changed to one of joy as she understood, and she quickly snatched the bowl out of my hands, rapidly slurping the soup straight from the bowl.

“If only you had done this from the beginning instead of putting on airs.”

And she was back to this attitude. This was why I disliked those beings called “beautiful women”. Beautiful witches were even worse.

The witch finished the soup in record time, and even picked out the scraps of dried meat at the bottom of the bowl. She held out the bowl to me with an attitude that made it clear she didn’t expect to be refused, not even a little.

“More.”

How immodest. I furrowed my brow; of course I wasn’t going to give her seconds.

“What the heck are ya here for? What d’ya want from me?”

“I really would like to tell you, but I just don’t have the strength to do so on an empty stomach.”

How could she be so shameless? Yet I knew that even if I glared at her, she wouldn’t be intimidated in the slightest.

I didn’t want to provoke her because I treasured my life. Since the witch didn’t seem to have any intent of attacking and for some reason didn’t carry out her threats, she would have to listen to me. The only issue was that she might take offense to my requests.

“If you answer me, I’ll give you another bowl.”

The witch looked back and forth between the empty bowl and me, then suddenly thrust the bowl toward me, as if to say, *I’ll talk, so hand over the soup*. She then began talking in a dispassionate tone.

“I’m on a journey to find a man named ‘Thirteenth.’”

*Thirteenth isn’t a name; it’s a number.*

I wanted to interrupt, but I held myself back. After all, the other party was a witch. I couldn’t use common sense when dealing with her.

“Thirteenth was our companion. We studied sorcery together in the forest of the bowed moon, and he had to leave to take care of a problem. We haven’t received any news from him ever since, so we had no choice but to follow his trail of magic and ended up here.”

“The Forest of the Bowed Moon” was located at the very edge of the continent, and was often called “The Forest Without a King”. No country wanted to annex the region because it had a deep connection to witches, so it became an area of nothing. Supposedly, the church had organized witch hunts in that area a countless number of times, but... in a place where witches freely roamed the land, the hunting squads had proved incompetent.

“There are witch hunts in this country, right?”

“There’re witch hunts everywhere.”

The witch’s expression darkened, and she began to rant.

“The hunts are far more aggressive here. Three times I was almost burned at the stake just for walking around.”

I nodded. It was the problem currently faced by the Wenias kingdom. The problem that it was trying to solve by gathering fallen beast mercenaries—the problem of witches.

“There’s a witches’ rebellion goin’ on right now, so ‘course the witch hunts here would be more severe than other places.”

“A witches’ rebellion?”

Asking for an explanation, the witch blinked.

“Isn’t it the wrong era for that?”

*Shouldn’t you support them because you’re a witch too?* It seemed to me that this witch was different from the others.

Well, it certainly was the wrong era to be revolting. Large-scale witch rebellions were unheard of outside of folk tales.

“I thought so too, so I didn’t believe the news when I heard it...’till that witch chased me through the woods. It was easy to figure out what was goin’ on after that, ‘cause witches didn’t usually attack travelers.”

The way other countries hunted down witches made it seem like they were hunting for survivors.

It was said that, five hundred years ago, there had been a great conflict between the witches and the church. The witches had lost and were forced into hiding. Now they were viewed as evil, and the world sought to eradicate them.

But—it had been five hundred years. They were probably fed up.

Of course, it was right for the church and government to hunt witches who were causing calamities left and right, but it wasn’t right for them to hunt witches who were content to live their lives peacefully. As far as the church was concerned, witch hunts were, from their

conception, simply a way to demonstrate its might and authority. If evil didn't exist, neither would the concept of righteousness. If the concept of righteousness didn't exist, then no one would believe in God. For this reason, the church decided to make witches symbols of evil.

If a state requested aid from them, the Knights of the Church would mobilize... for an exorbitant "donation".

Since Wenias didn't seek the Knights' aid this time, the Church was simply watching from the sidelines. This situation suited the witches of Wenias, who rioted as they pleased while the kingdom desperately tried to suppress them.

"Actually, ever since I got to Wenias, I've been hearin' lots of rumors 'bout witches runnin' rampant. Apparently it ain't rare to see witches takin' over villages and enslavin' all the villagers either, but I guess it's possible that witches like those are just takin' advantage of the revolution. You pretend like you don't know what's goin' on, but you're actually here to help the witches, aren't you?"

The witch trembled and turned pale.

"I wouldn't want to do something that bothersome! If the rebellion succeeds then the country would need a ruler, right? I don't want that responsibility. The only country I would consider ruling would be one that is dark, cramped, and full of spiders."

*That kind of country doesn't exist.* I imagined her being swarmed by spiders, and immediately regretted it. My dinner didn't look so appeti—. Huh? The pot was gone.

I realized that I was no longer holding onto the pot, and immediately turned to look at the witch. Somehow, she had managed to steal it away, and was hurriedly drinking the soup.

"You...when—how'd you do that?!"

"I'm a witch, mercenary. With your guard down just now, I could have easily robbed you of all your fur. Luck won't save you if you don't pay attention, just like how this soup is now mine."

"W-Why you greenhorn, don't lecture me!"

I uttered a low growl, but the pot was already in her hands, and I had no way of getting it back. Left with no other choice, I licked what was left of the soup off of the bowl I was still holding.

"So? What's your business here?"

"I'm looking for a book some villains stole from me. That's what Thirteenth left to find."

"A book?"

"It's the only book of its kind. If it were used for evil, some small problems would arise."

"Like what?"

The witch stopped speaking and stopped eating. She spoke in a soft voice.

Just one remark.

“The end of the world.”

“...What about the world?”

“I said, the end of the world.”

I stifled a yawn.

“That’s amazin’. I’m *so* scared. I feel like I’m gonna cry ‘cause I’m so scared right now.”

“Even If you don’t believe me, can you still try to be civil? I feel a bit hurt.”

“I’m not stupid enough to believe that a single book could end the whole world.”

“A single book...? Don’t kid yourself. A single *page* from that book would be more than enough.”

Her voice was as dispassionate as a demon’s, not exaggeratedly fearful; it was as if she were merely stating fact. Thus, her tone exuded a certain degree of realism, so I couldn’t help but suspend my disbelief.

Pragmatically speaking, the world was fine despite the book’s theft. I didn’t know exactly when it had been stolen, but from the way the witch spoke, I could tell that this “Thirteenth” person had been away for a long time.

If this book really could be used to bring about doomsday, then it should have happened by now.

“Well, even if everythin’ you’ve told me so far is true, still, what do I got to do with any of it? I asked you what you wanted from me, but you still haven’t given me a straight answer.”

“What, you really don’t get it yet?”

“Sorry, but I ain’t that smart.”

“Then to sum things up: I have to retrieve a book from some thieves, and it’s currently held in this country somewhere. But I can’t just walk around alone in these parts; I *am* a witch after all. Besides, fleeing gets rather tiring after a while.”

“So,” the witch looked at me. At last, I realized what she was getting at.

## Part 4

“Escort me!”

“Never!” I yelled back.

“You may want to calm down before making a decision.”

“I don’t needa think hard about it. I *hate* witches.”

“Wait, hear me out. We witches offer up sacrifices to demons in order to realize our desires. In fact, forming contracts with demons and paying them sacrifices commensurate in scope with one’s wishes are key concepts in the study of sorcery.”

“I don’t care ’bout your stupid law of equivalent exchange. I’m in this country only to be a witch exterminator, ’cause a world without witches is a world that’s gonna be safer for me. So as you can see, protectin’ you wouldn’t be like me at all.”

“A man who speaks his mind, huh... but why do you despise us so?”

“Can’t you tell from lookin’ at my face?”

“Your face?”

The witch, gazing at my visage, cocked her head.

“It is pretty handsome; I can’t say that I dislike it.”

“’S that sarcasm?”

“Not really. You have a magnificent coat, keen eyes, and a robust jaw—all the hallmarks of an apex predator. Furthermore, the human visage hidden beneath your bestial exterior is pleasant-looking as well.”

A human face—beneath my fur? I ran my hands over my face, but it was still that of a beast.

“You can see a human’s face here?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t be able to call myself a witch if I couldn’t. By the way, you’re incorrect in calling yourself a “fallen beast”. Your appearance is actually the result of the recursive spell ‘Beastgranting’.

“Re...recursive spell?”

“‘Beastgranting’ was an attempt by witches to grant humans the strength of animals. It ended up changing the humans’ bodies into those of beasts. I hear that thousands of years ago, when states did nothing but fight amongst each other, such humans were mass-produced by the millions.”

“You tryin’ to tell me that witches made us fallen beasts?!”

“That’s not entirely correct. Although recursive spells are similar to normal spells, the two are actually quite different. Spells are actively cast, while recursive spells are the end results of specific chains of events.”

“You’re not makin’ any sense.”

I frowned. As if she were dealing with a struggling student, the witch began to speak animatedly.

“I shall demonstrate. First, hand me that pebble.”

She pointed to a benign-looking piece of rock next to me. After I handed it to her, she began playing with it in her palm.

“Let this stone represent sorcery. Being a witch, I cast it.”

She threw the pebble with force I had not imagined to be possible from such thin arms. It ricocheted off a tree, somehow went around her, and hit me square in the head.

A solid *crunch* that would not be out of place in a boxing match resounded around the clearing. Thankfully, I was a fallen beast, so I avoided having my head cracked open.

“...Ow.”

The witch turned toward me and shrugged, as if to say “it was an accident”.

“The rock hit the tree, bounced back, missed me, and continued along its path until it hit you. The same principle applies to sorcery.”

“How it bounced off the tree and hit me?”

“Exactly. When the aforementioned beast warriors die, their spirits return to the witch that made them. But, if the witch is dead, then these spirits instead ‘return’ to the witch’s closest relative. The process is analogous to fertilization. So these spirits inhabit women’s wombs, and are reborn as what you would call ‘fallen beasts’.”

“In other words, you’re sayin’ that I had a relative who was a witch, and I was born a fallen beast ‘cause she died? No way!”

“Even if it’s not common knowledge, the truth is still the truth. I’m a witch. I don’t kid around about things concerning sorcery.”

Contradicting her claim was the Church’s proclamation that “being born a fallen beast is an indication of evil deeds in past lives.” Accordingly, public knowledge stated that fallen beasts were warlike, had violent tendencies, and spent all their time fighting.

As for me, who would do anything for a peaceful life, I wanted to tell the Church to “stop joking around and get lost,” but most people believed its message. It was extremely disheartening.

“But... havin’ a witch in my family tree...”

“Witches are generally estranged from their families, and live for an extremely long time. When a family forgets that there was once a witch in their family tree, the spell returns.”

The witch let out a sigh, staring melancholically into the now-empty pot.

“—Do you wish to be human again?” the witch asked.

“—*Can* I be human again?” I countered.

The witch smiled.

“I *can* turn you back. Quite easily, in fact. But will you accompany me in return? Make your choice, mercenary.”

My dream was to open a bar somewhere out in the countryside, meet a nice girl, and live a tranquil life.

If this witch was true to her word, then I could claim the normal life I’d long ago given up on. I wouldn’t have to hide my face, live in fear of witches, or scare away harlots anymore. The only question was whether or not I could trust her. She *was* a witch, after all.

“What use could someone as dumb as I am be to a witch?”

“Perhaps I simply want you because you’re fascinating. I’m not a particularly picky witch. Above all else, above even that head of yours, I want you. My guard would need limbs to fulfill his duty.”

“You’re not sayin’ this just to make me let my guard down, are ya?”

“Oh, come on. If I really wanted to kill you, I would have done so a long time ago and without pointless conversation.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. In all my years of dealing with witches, I haven’t seen a single one be so trustworthy. I wouldn’t say that this witch was deserving of trust, but she wasn’t to be immediately discredited either.

I wanted to be able to trust her, but if she was lying...

She *was* a witch, after all.

“...Shall we form a pact?” the witch abruptly suggested.

“A pact?” I asked, confused.

“The witches’ pact, a contract of blood. You agree to be my bodyguard, and I agree to make you a human; then the document is drafted using a mix of our blood. Anyone that breaks the agreement would be unconditionally annihilated.”

“A... annihilated... you...”

I faltered. In contrast, the witch smiled leisurely.

"There's no need to be afraid. You'll be fine as long as you abide by the terms of the agreement. Here, hold out your hand."

She quickly grabbed my hand, giving me no time to object.

Her hand was soft. My heart skipped a beat.

She drew my index finger toward her lips and, without hesitating, put the tip in her mouth. I shuddered as she ran her tongue over my bare skin. It felt as if every hair on my body was standing on end.

"W-Woah!"

A moment later, I winced as the skin on my fingertip was torn open. The witch nodded with satisfaction as she saw the steady trickle of blood running from my finger, and did the same to her own.

"With this mixture of our blood, I will write a contract in mirror writing. When it is burned, the contract will be complete. Then, unless either one of us dies or we both agree to abandon these terms, you and I will be bound by this pact. Unfortunately, I don't have any paper on me, so I guess cloth will have to suffice."

The witch tore a piece of cloth off the hem of her robe, which made her appear to be even more ragged than she already was. I watched the crimson blood drip from our fingers, strangely calm.

"Hey... why're you choosin' me? If you want to attract less suspicion, why don'tcha choose a less noticeable person to travel with? Bein' near me'll only draw more attention to you."

"Since I wish to go unnoticed, it only makes sense to pick someone that will draw all the suspicion toward himself and away from me."

The witch answered nonchalantly. *I see*. Whether or not that was true remained to be seen, although between a fallen beast and a witch, the former would definitely attract more attention.

"Also, you smell like the cave I used to live in."

"The cave you used to live in?"

"That's right. It was a limestone cave in the forest of the bowed moon, and was quite comfortable despite being dark and damp. I called it my 'hole in the ground'. That's a phrase we witches use to refer to our lairs."

I lightly sniffed my arm, wrinkling my nose. I'd been running through the forest for a long time so I positively reeked of turf, but even so, I smelled strongly of animals.

"...Did ya keep livestock?"

"Livestock...? Oh yes, we had quite a few snakes and spiders."

What did *spiders* have to do with livestock and snakes? I wanted to find the nearest inn and take a hot bath to rid myself of the thought.

Just then, I started chuckling.

Here I was, in front of a witch, about to form a blood pact and possibly facing annihilation—and I was thinking about taking a bath. It appeared that I had already subconsciously recognized that the witch meant me no harm. I had been foolish to rely on logic alone to judge her. After all, my intuition was the reason that I was still alive today.

I stroked my snout and picked up the rag she was holding.

“Wait! The contract isn’t—“

Before the witch could say “—done yet”, I tore the piece of cloth to shreds and scattered them to the wind.

The witch yelled in protest.

“Aah!! What are you doing?! Do you think writing on a rag using blood as ink is easy?!”

“A contract implies that we don’t trust each other. We don’t need somethin’ like that. Here, gimme your hand for a sec.”

This time, I was the one grabbing *her* hand. It was small and delicate, and blood was dripping from her finger.

I pressed our cut fingertips together, mixing our blood.

The witch looked at me with recognition in her eyes.

“I think I recognize this. Is it a blood oath?” she asked excitedly, pale cheeks flushed. “It’s done like this, right?” laughing, she intertwined our fingers, and firmly pressed her extended thumb against mine.

“It’s better than those formal contracts you witches use. This is more natural for humans—for mercenaries.”

I extricated my hand from her strong grip, the blood on my finger still surprisingly warm. I wondered if mixing fallen beast and witch blood would produce something unexpected. But seeing the witch standing there, thumb covered in blood, I no longer cared.

“I promise, mercenary, that I will not take your head.”

“Oh. ‘kay, thanks. So... what’s your name?”

“My name is Zero.”

*Zero is a number, not a name.* I considered telling her, but decided not to.

After that, the conversation lapsed into silence. I glanced at her searchingly.

“Aren’t you... gonna ask me my name?”

The witch shrugged drowsily.

“I’m not interested.”

“Huh?”

“The only people I refer to by name are my underlings—my servants. Keep your name private in the company of witches. If you gave me your name, I could immediately turn you into an unquestioning lackey.”

The witch smirked from under her hood. She held out both hands as if to say “in your face”. She looked both childish and grandmotherly at the same time.

“Ultimately, you’re still a witch, eh?”

“Yes. I’m the ultimate witch.”

I chuckled, and the witch laughed in agreement: “It does sound pretty terrifying, doesn’t it?”

And so, our extraordinary relationship began. Neither of us had referred to the other by name, so it was as if we were strangers. However, I guess that was normal for a night-old fellowship.

It was a good distance to maintain in case our partnership ended prematurely.

## **Chapter Two — The Book of Zero**



## 二章 【ゼロの書】

## Part 1

Soft. Warm. Fragrant.

I was hugging something, whatever it was. Regardless, it was an unusually pleasant morning.

I opened my eyes lethargically and saw the burnt-out campfire, along with the blackened ground beneath it. I tried to recall what had happened last night, but couldn't remember a thing. *Something about a witch?*

"Zzz..." A noise came from within my embrace. *Oh, the witch.* I thought sleepily.

"Mas...ter..."

"Eh...wha?!"

I was instantly wide awake. Something went "gueh" like a squashed frog as I leapt to my feet. Looking over, I saw the witch, Zero, clad in robes which were nothing more than rags. She had been sent flying by my sudden movement, and was now lying on the ground, still as a corpse. No longer obscured by her hood, which had fallen to the side, her unbearably beautiful face was illuminated by the sunlight.

It seemed that for humans, once one attained a certain degree of beauty, the concepts of age and gender no longer applied. As for Zero, who appeared sexless, she possessed both the innocence of a young girl and the allure of a prostitute. Either way, it unsettled me.

"Wha...what're ya doin'?!"

Zero opened her bleary eyes slightly and began moving about restlessly as if she were looking for something, all with a displeased look on her face.

"Fur..."

"—Eh?"

"So cold...my fur...head...so soft and fluffy..."

"Wake up!" I yelled, striking her on the head.

"Gah!" Zero jumped, startled.

"O... ow! Why did you have to hit me?! I was only sleeping!"

"You've got a problem with everythin', huh? What were you doin' while you were sleepin'?!"

"What...was I doing?"

Zero groggily repeated my question back to me as she gingerly rubbed her head.

“Um...if I’m not mistaken, I was sleeping in your mantle, buried in fur.”

“Why’re you answerin’ me so calmly...? I’m scoldin’ you! Say sorry once you’ve caught on!”

“Don’t start the day off yelling with such an infuriated look on your face; you’re going to scare the animals. What are you so mad about, anyway?”

*Yawn*, she opened her mouth wide and yawned. Zero narrowed her eyes as if the sunlight was too bright, and cheerfully pulled her hood back on. It hid the upper half of her face from view, and was unfashionable—not to mention suspicious-looking—but I finally felt at ease after she did so. Extreme attractiveness was poisonous to my eyes.

“Were you bothered by my intrusion into your personal space? There’s no helping it, since you have lots of fur, and as you saw, my skin doesn’t protect me very well from the cold. Unless you want me to freeze while you get to sleep snugly all by yourself?”

“But, y’know, I didn’t choose to have a fur coat...”

“It’s not a question of whether you chose to or not. It’s about how you aren’t shivering in the cold. Besides, you didn’t find the experience displeasing, right?”

Her mouth was etched into a thin smile. I thought back to how soft and warm and fragrant she had felt when I had woken up, and my retort caught in my throat. As if she’d read my mind, she nodded with satisfaction.

“It’s cold and lonely to sleep by myself, so since there are two of us here, it only makes sense to sleep together. And above all, you were able to sleep with someone as exquisite as I am. I would say that you should be thankful and not angry.”

“You really just called yourself ‘squisite...”

“The fact still is that you’re resistant to the cold.” She repeated her words from earlier with a triumphant expression.

“Do witches lack modesty or shyness or somethin’...?” I tutted.

“Someone with those qualities couldn’t possibly do a witch’s duties. What, have you fallen for me?” she said in a strange, almost gleeful voice.

“No!” I cut her off immediately.

Probably. No, definitely.

“Ugh, how boring.” The witch really did sound bored.

“So...well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s fine if you likewise think of me as just some inanimate object. You will be my bed, and I will be your hug pillow. That way, we both benefit. I’m glad we’ve reached an agreement.”

“Don’t assume that I agree to this! I—“

“You are my mercenary—right? A mercenary must obey his employer.”

She was right, but the thought of cuddling with a beauty every night made me more tense than overjoyed.

As if to break the silence, Zero’s stomach rumbled.

“...I’m hungry, mercenary.”

I released the tension in my shoulders as I saw how she was gazing at me.

Arguing seemed foolish when my opponent was in a state like this. I did have some birds I caught last night...

“ ‘S roast bird with salt okay with ya?”

Zero just grinned nonchalantly and pestered me to hurry up.

.....

“I wanted to hunt witches, but somehow wound up escorting one instead...” something like that would probably get laughs at the bar. But of course, there was no way I would go around advertising myself as a witch’s escort. I’d get burnt at the stake right along with Zero.

Preparing to roast the birds, I discussed our plans for today with her. I needed to know where her destination was, as she hadn’t told me yet.

Zero didn’t know any of the place names in Wenias, so I took out my map and had her indicate where she was going.

“Where are we right now?”

Holding the map open, Zero tilted her head to the side. I pointed to a spot on the map. She nodded and said “hm...”, sliding her finger across the map.

Two finger lengths from the spot I was pointing to—there it was. Prasta, the imperial capital.

“Thirteenth is around here. At least, that’s how I feel,” Zero answered blankly. I was perplexed; Prasta was where I was heading. That is to say, it was witch hunt headquarters. The fact that the capital was recruiting fallen beasts because skirmishes with witches went all the way to the kingdom’s heartland meant that there was no way I could lead a witch there without consequences.

“Prasta’s fightin’ some witches right now, so there ain’t no way that a sorcerer’s gonna be there. Ya probably just made a mis—”

“I did not use logic based on common sense to arrive at my conclusion. Instead, you should think of it simply as a reflection of reality. If you trace Thirteenth’s trail of magic, there is no doubt that he is there somewhere. He should be there.” Zero nodded confidently. It seemed like she was hell-bent on going to Prasta.

But what the heck was “Thirteenth” doing in the conflict-ridden heartland?

“It’s gettin’ more and more suspicious, ain’t it? How can ya be so sure that this “Thirteenth” guy ain’t tryna help take over the kingdom?”

“Thirteenth loves to laze around. He knows that taking over a country would only mean more trouble for him.”

“Then what’s he’s doin’ in Wenias?”

“I think I already told you that he is searching for that book. If you think about the kind of knowledge the book contains, it makes sense for him to be searching in places where witches are rebelling.”

“Oh yeah, the book that’s *totally* gonna destroy the world.”

Without realizing it, I had spoken in a mocking manner. Zero didn’t seem angry at all, merely nodding her head, lending my words an eerie sincerity. A chill ran down my spine. I grabbed the branch the salted bird meat was spitted on, and planted it upright in the ground, where it began to sizzle as I roasted it in the open fire. I posed Zero a question, whose eyes sparkled with anticipation as she gazed at the meat.

## Part 2

“When all’s said ’n done, what kind’a book is it anyway? The book ya say can ‘destroy the world.’”

Zero managed to wrench her gaze away from the browning meat and faced me, breaking into a conceited smile.

“It was written in unfading ink, on parchment perfumed with the finest incense. It was bound with ebony polished to the point that you could see your reflection in it, hinged with gold, and embellished in unsurpassable detail. After an initial glance, anyone would—”

“I ain’t askin’ ‘bout what it looks like! I’m askin’ ‘bout what it says!”

No, the book's appearance would be useful to know since we were looking for it, but it wasn't what I wanted to hear about. Zero's expression turned sour. "It really is a magnificent book," she muttered in complaint. "I don't think you would be able to wrap your head around the content even if I explained it..."

"If ya can't make someone understand even after explainin', then it was probably a third-rate explanation, eh?"

Zero stared at me silently. Likewise, I silently stared at her. We glared at each other, briefly—

"How much do you know about the study of sorcery?" she suddenly asked. It seemed that I had won the stare-down.

"I dunno 'bout the specifics an' such, but... somethin' about summonin' demons and doin' mystical stuff, right?"

"Well, you are correct about that. But do you know by what means?"

"By drawin' a summoning circle, chantin' some spell, and performin' a sacrifice." I answered without hesitation, and Zero nodded with satisfaction.

"Right again. We then negotiate with the summoned demon to perform supernatural tasks. That is essentially sorcery."

Even to people unfamiliar with sorcery, this was common knowledge, found everywhere from the church's preaching to children's books. This was because witches were playing very active roles as villains in today's culture.

"Now, those arrows of light that attacked you last night—I called those 'Staim'. What did you think after seeing them?"

I was a bit confused. Zero laughed when I remained silent.

"There's no need to overthink it. You were stunned, I assume?"

"Ah, well...hmm...yeah."

"Humans would be stunned, mercenary, because it was completely unexpected. Because they subconsciously believe that something like that could never happen."

For sure, the "arrows of light" that the hostile witch had used and the "suddenly appearing earthen box" that Zero had created had both made me revise what I thought I knew about sorcery. I didn't recall seeing the hostile witch drawing summoning circles while she walked, and neither had I seen her offer up any sacrifices. Naturally, I hadn't seen any demons either. I had heard rumors that Wenias' witches had recently started using sorcery of an unknown nature, but what I had seen had proven to be beyond my imagination.

“So my common sense was wrong?”

“It’s the other way around. Your common sense was simply misled. Strictly speaking, ‘Staim’ is not sorcery.”

“It...it ain’t sorcery?”

*What the heck it is then?* Before I could say a word, Zero answered my thought.

“Yes, it is not sorcery. It is ‘magic.’”

“Ma...jick...? Wha...”

I repeated the unfamiliar word back to her, but silently forming the word over and over with my mouth wasn’t getting me any closer to its meaning. Zero burst out laughing. *Was I making a really weird face just now?*

“What the hell’re ya laughin’ at?!”

“Oh—I was just thinking that, for a supposedly violent and fierce mercenary, you were actually making a pretty cute face just now.”

“C-cute—?! Yer callin’ me...!”

“Don’t be so embarrassed, mercenary; you’re getting cuter by the second. I can barely hold myself back from hugging you.”

To a mercenary like me, being apprehended and called cute was unbelievably insulting.

To soothe my discontent, I sprinkled some crushed dried herbs and salt on the meat, which had begun emitting a mouthwatering smell. The fire crackled and spat yellow sparks as some salt fell in.

“Even though it does not concern you, I will still give you a proper elucidation. After all, it would sully the name ‘the witch of earth and darkness’ to be thought of as ‘third-rate’. But before I discuss the details of magic, I must share some preliminary knowledge with you first. I’m talking about understanding what sorcery is, of course. If you don’t know how sorcery works, then I won’t be able to explain magic to you.”

Zero picked up a tree branch and began engraving strange symbols into the ground. After finishing one glyph, she would move on to the next—until, in front of my eyes, a circle composed of many, many markings was formed.

“—A summoning circle?”

“Correct. A summoning circle is required for the summoning of demons. Witches consider summoning circles to be sacred ground. They possess the ability to amplify the power of witches’ spirits and are essential for witches to protect themselves from any demons they summon.”

Zero circumscribed the ring of glyphs with a single circular line. It was so perfectly round that there was no way a human could have drawn it with a tree branch. There were four smaller circles inside the outer circle, evenly spaced away from one another, and crammed with minuscule letters and symbols I could neither read nor understand.

“Protectin’ themselves from demons? Do the demons attack ‘em or somethin’?”

“Far from attacking; if there is any imperfection in the summoning circle, the demon will *devour* the witch. That is why all witches master the art of drawing summoning circles before anything else. Perfect circles, perfect lines, perfect calligraphy. If you cannot master those techniques, it is impossible to become a witch.”

“Ain’t that riskin’ your life then?”

“Yes...summoning demons is always a risky business.” Zero declared, finishing the summoning circle.

*Don’t tell me she’s actually gonna use...* with that, I looked at Zero with terror.

“Wait! No way...you gonna summon a demon?!”

“Exactly. Well, just watch. I feel like you’ll find it fairly interesting.”

Ignoring my pleas for her to stop, Zero held out her hands toward the summoning circle and began to mutter, chanting out a spell. I wanted to stop her, but at the same time I was afraid of messing up the sorcery somehow and causing something bad to happen. I half-rose to my feet, ready to escape at a moment’s notice. However, I couldn’t muster up the nerve to run, so I stayed, trembling with fear, glancing between Zero and the summoning circle.

—Around five minutes passed. Zero still stood there, chanting the same spell.

By that point, I’d gotten tired of being vigilant. *Is anythin’ gonna happen at this rate?* The moment those thoughts materialized in my head, the summoning circle began to glow. It was a pale, blue light. Something appeared on the other side.

—*Shit, it’s here. What the hell is it...?!* I leapt away from the circle with all my might.

A second later the light vanished, and I stared at the thing that Zero had summoned.

Its body was similar to that of a human’s, but it was definitely inhuman. It had deep emerald-colored eyes without any whites in them, and insect-like wings sprouting from its back. And—it was surprisingly small.

*It’s smaller ’n the palm of my hand, this thing.*

“That’s...a demon?”

“Yes, it is a demon. But...aren’t you a bit too scared of it?”

“Shaddap! There ain’t a human alive that’s not scared of demons, ‘sides witches!”

I was standing as far away as possible, so on edge that the hair on my tail was standing on end. Zero looked astonished at my reaction.

“Come take a closer look, it’s perfectly safe. He won’t bite. In fact, this is technically a sprite, even though it is called a demon.”

“Fine, so there might be some difference between sprites ’n demons, but—“

“There is no difference. Essentially, they are the same thing. What they are called depends on the time period and geographic location, but we witches refer to any inhuman creature by the generic term ‘demon’. This includes sprites, spirits—and gods, of course.”

I was shocked.

“Ain’t it wrong to lump gods in with demons?”

“The Church makes no distinction between pagan gods and demons. In other words, even the Church admits that the public’s perception of their God as being different from demons is simply a misconception caused by their faith.”

I calmly accepted that revelation. I didn’t worship any deity anyway, so her explanation was much more believable to me than there being only one true God.

I edged toward the summoning circle and gazed at the tiny and clearly unnerved demon. It went *bzzt bzzt* like a buzzing insect.

“...Is this guy scared?”

“Seems so. Low-ranking demons like this one are almost never summoned, so he’s probably not used to it.”

“So demons have ranks ’n such?”

“They do. There is a strict hierarchy in the world of demons. The higher-ranking ones possess great power, and have numerous lower-ranking ones as slaves. Thus, if you manage to summon a high-ranking demon, you can learn the summoning procedures for many lower-ranked demons from them. Thus the study of sorcery has flourished and grown like the branch of a giant tree.”

## Part 3

“So, what rank’s this ‘un?”

“It’s exceedingly close to being the weakest. So weak that you could probably crush it with your hand.”

It looked like I had been scared for nothing. Still, it was shocking to discover that there were demons weaker than I was.

“O tiny demon—please grant my request.”

The demon stared at the branch Zero held out, took a deep breath—and exhaled fire.

Having ignited the branch, the demon looked at Zero inquiringly.

“Right. Now for my side of the bargain. Thank you for the hard work.”

Nodding her head in satisfaction, Zero reached into the pouch at her waist and pulled out a small nut. She cracked it open and put the kernel in the demon’s mouth. It shook its shoulders and disappeared.

I went from staring at a demon to staring at empty space, letting out a breath of astonishment.

“That’s amazin’...it’s the first time I’d seen a demon ’n sorcery with m’own two eyes.”

“Was how I drew the summoning circle, recited the spell, summoned the demon, and bargained roughly how you thought it would be like?”

Zero blew out the flame on the tip of her tree branch. It had been exactly as I had imagined. Disregarding the demon’s benign appearance, the process had been exactly as described in public knowledge.

“—Now, time for me to address the aforementioned book. The grimoire contains instructions on how to perform sorcery by simply speaking the appropriate spell. It is split into four sections called ‘books’: the book of Hunting, the book of Capturing, the book of Harvesting, and the book of Safeguarding.”

While speaking, she waved her finger once. A small flame flickered on her fingertip.

My eyes went wide open, and I stepped back to distance myself.

“This is the power of the demon you saw just now: to start a small fire. I neither drew a summoning circle nor summoned anything, yet the result is the same. This is magic. In the past, I would have had to recite ‘Karlo, rai... fire, lodge here... the Book of Hunting, verse one: «Leks»... Sanction this! I declareth myself to be Zero,’ but no more.”

“Y...you can even skip the spell?”

“If you have enough experience and proficiency, yes. Now, spells are composed of three distinct elements. In the spell I recited just now, the phrase “karlo, rai” is meant to spur the demon to action. The phrase “fire, lodge here” is a clear declaration of intent meant to guide oneself, and

bringing the recitation to a close with the spell's name and one's own name is analogous to a battle cry."

*Battle cry...*? Reading my thoughts, Zero nodded with vigor.

"Enunciating one's own name along with the spell's name is very helpful while practicing magic. As one gains experience, the need for this aid diminishes. After enough practice, one can simply chant the spell silently—almost like a prayer, if you will. It's pretty convenient, right? You can start a fire without having to keep a piece of flint handy."

It did seem really useful. My hands were larger than a normal human's hands by far, so although I could start fires with flint fit for human hands, it was tough and frustrating. Zero blew out the flickering fire on her fingertip as I sighed with envy. I finally began to grasp what Zero had meant when she had said my common knowledge was not wrong, but simply misguided. Still...

"How're ya borrowin' the power of a demon that ain't even been summoned if ya really do need'a summon it first?"

"No, that's not it. It's just that...no one had ever tried to borrow a demon's power without summoning it first."

No one had ever tried...? That meant—

"That's...stupid, ain't it?! Then...what was the point o' summonin' demons in the first place? Were ya wastin' time on purpose?"

"Exactly. No one tried to stop the practice, so we just continued to summon demons, trying to minimize the risk they posed to the world. That was sorcery. It was not that we lacked the means to perform sorcery without summoning demons. It was more of a self-inflicted inconvenience."

—They had blundered right at the beginning.

And sorcery had developed with this mistake at its roots. For god knows how many centuries, this mistake had gone unnoticed. I was speechless. Facing me, Zero continued.

"The founding principle of magic is written in that stolen book; namely, the fact that sorcery does not require the summoning of demons. It also includes documentation on countless demons' names and powers, along with spells and the sacrifices demanded by each one. The tasks one can perform through the help of demons are set in stone, and there is no room for negotiation. Just as pouring salt into a fire will color it yellow, such predetermined behavior is found with demons as well."

Zero paused.

“I call this the *Demon Contracts Principle*—magic for short.”<sup>3</sup>

At last, I managed to grasp the meaning of the word “magic”.

Magic was a new technique that got rid of the most labor-intensive part of sorcery, the summoning of demons, and made sorcery quick and easy to perform.

It could be thought of as the difference between summoning the king into your own room to hear your request, and simply writing your request in a letter to the king. No matter how you thought of it, the latter was obviously the simpler way, but witches used the former method and studied it tenaciously.

—But, what if one book were to correct this error?

It took thousands of soldiers to take down one witch, yet just one witch to slaughter thousands of soldiers. But, the Church—the world would be able to overpower the witches, because sorcery was both labor and time intensive. In the middle of their ceremonies, witches were defenseless and easy to kill. Few witches possessed the ability to command powerful sorcery, so the death of even one of them could be called a victory.

But if knowledge of magic, a simpler and faster version of sorcery, spread across the globe...

“Seems like that sure ain’t somethin’ ta laugh at.”

There had been great technological revolutions in the past. The discovery of iron revolutionized warfare. The invention of the wheel and subsequently the horse-drawn cart revolutionized commerce. How was the discovery of magic going to change the world...?

First, witches would probably become stronger. If there were more witches like Zero and the witch from the woods yesterday, then there would be a high likelihood that a second war would erupt between the Church and the witches. Actually, there wouldn’t just be a *likelihood* of war—there *would* be war.

That was exactly what was going on in Wenias right now. Witches, having hidden themselves away for five hundred years, had started a revolt. Zero’s missing book had to have something to do with this state of affairs.

“So, that witch from last night used the magic from yer book?”

Zero dropped her shoulders in agreement as I summarized the situation.

“Was she the one who stole it?”

---

3 “Demon Contracts Principle” in Japanese is “akuma no keiyaku housoku” (悪魔の契約法則), and “magic” in Japanese is “mahou” (魔法). The relationship between the two is that the “ma” (魔) in “mahou” is taken from the “ma” (魔) in “akuma” (demon), and that the “hou” (法) in “mahou” is from the “hou” (法) in “housoku” (law). Thus “mahou” (魔法) is an amalgam of the two and can be very roughly interpreted as “Demons’ Law”. The term “magic” will continue to be used in the translation.

“No, she was still a novice. I tried to ask her about the book’s whereabouts, but gave up because she was in too much of a fury to converse with. Either way, it seemed that someone had taught her what she knew.”

“Someone had taught her... ah...”

Once read, one book’s knowledge would become the knowledge of millions.

The same thing must have happened to Zero’s book. The remaining question was whether or not only witches had knowledge about magic. From what I had heard so far, it was sufficient to simply recite a spell and provide the appropriate sacrifice to use magic...

“What you’re suggestin’ is that...anyone can use magic?”

“No...that’s not it. There is no gray area between those who can and those who cannot. You will be able to practice magic if you have the talent for it, but if you do not, then you will not be able to practice magic no matter how hard you try. Knowledge can only take you so far.”

“This *talent* o’ yours...how d’ya see if someone has it or not?”

“It’s simple. They simply need to try reciting a beginner-level spell. If the spell shows signs of activation, then they have the talent, and if not, then they do not. If they have the talent, then it takes at most five years to learn the craft.”

*I see—there’s no way for this to be worse.* Magic was terrifyingly powerful, and those with talent would need a mere five years to learn to use it. There were almost certainly people who would abuse this power for evil.

I realized why Zero was so anxious.

*The world really might fall into ruin.*

Far from the whole book, a single page would do. It was just as Zero had said.

I thought back to the tree trunk-piercing arrows of light from last night. Normally, to create that kind lethality with a bow, you would need a huge bow, iron-shafted arrows, and a monster of a strongman to draw and release the weapon. On the battlefield, a man like that would be plenty threatening. A *group* of people who could use magic like “Staim” would undoubtedly be able to force an enemy army to retreat with their tails between their legs.

If the group had proper leadership and behaved with army-like discipline, everything could still be fine. But what if the group of magic users devolved into a looting mob? What if some shady bastard discovered that he had a talent for magic? Who would be able to stop them?

If knowledge about magic were to spread, all sorts of power balances would be broken, and that would mark the beginning of chaos and conflict.

## Part 4

“That book’s a real pain in the ass. Why’s somethin’ like that...”

“It’s because...”

Zero shut her mouth, and nearly simultaneously, I shot to my feet.

Bloodlust—just now, from somewhere close by. Before I could look for the threat, I heard a strange sound and turned to face the direction from which it came. Zero seemed to notice it as well, and shifted her gaze to the woods.

*That’s it—the woods.* Something ridiculously large was ripping through the foliage nearby, heading straight for us.

“...No way. This ain’t a joke!”

Mowing down the trees in its path, the whatever-it-was flew out of the forest with a deafening roar and all the force of a cannonball.

The moment I saw it, some text from the map of Wenias floated to the front of my mind.

—*Warning! Wild Ebru boars live in the woods.*

It was an enormous boar. But even that was an understatement. This was—

“Hell, this thing’s way too big! It’s huge even compared to me!”

How could you not yell when something like this was coming to crush you? The Ebru boar possessed a towering body, no exaggeration whatsoever. As it met my easily two-meter high gaze, I couldn’t even laugh. Its ruined left eye and countless scars indicated that it was a veteran fighter who had repelled countless hunters.

Its remaining right eye was bloodshot, and drool dribbled from its mouth as it focused on me. Even now, it was ready to charge. Two razor-sharp tusks sprouted from either end of its mouth. Even a fallen beast like myself, if impaled by one of these, would be torn in two at the waist.

Fallen beasts were naturally disliked by animals. I had never had a problem with that characteristic before today.

*Should I run? No, there’s no point.* Considering the speed with which it had mowed through the woods, even if I reached the forest, there was no way I’d be able to escape. Carrying Zero, it would be even more impossible. Besides fighting, there were no other options.

I leapt to the side as it charged, planning to flank its head. If I could put out its other eye, I'd instantly have the upper hand—the battle already looked to be in my favor. I pulled out my sword. The sunlight glinted off of the sword blade and robbed the Ebru boar of its vision, forcing it to make a blind charge toward me. I prepared to dodge to the side, but stopped after, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Zero standing flat-footed behind me.

*This idiot, why—*

“Ya idiot! What're ya standin' there for?!”

I twisted my torso, drew Zero toward me, and dropped to the ground. The boar's cold tusks grazed past my back. I immediately jumped up and readied myself to get Zero to safety, but for some reason, she got up in front of me—directly between myself and the Ebru boar.

“Hm...how timely. I will be able to show you how magic looks in a real battle. I won't omit the chant this time.”

“Watch.” Zero said, gracefully raising her arms over her head. The boar, its charge having missed its target, was preparing to charge again. At the same moment as it kicked forward, Zero shouted.

“Meaza, Li, Kib...writhing vines, capture this boar and bind him! The Book of Hunting, Verse Eight—Kabrata! Sanction this! I declareth myself Zero!”

—I couldn't understand what happened next.

Before my eyes, countless vines flew out of the ground and wrapped themselves around the boar's hooves, sending it toppling to the ground. The creepers continued to wrap themselves around the boar until it could no longer move an inch. It took only a few seconds at most for Zero to complete the spell. There was no doubt that this was some kind of inhuman power.

This was—magic. If Zero could perform feats like this, then it didn't seem like she had a use for me. My *raison d'être* as a mercenary was in grave danger.

“By the way, mercenary...”

While I was staring blankly at the boar, which was on its back and looking comical as it waved its legs, Zero suddenly turned to face me.

“Is it edible? Delicious?”

“Uh huh,” I said impassively. I wasn't actually sure. It was just that I couldn't muster up the will to say anything else.

“Oh, so we can eat it?” Zero asked with a glowing expression. I rubbed my eyes, and proceeded to dampen Zero's high spirits.

“No...I mean, sure, it could be tasty, but...huntin' is forbidden. Let it go.”

Hopes dashed, Zero's face fell as plodded toward the boar.

She lightly flicked her finger in front of the enraged boar, who had been frothing at the mouth. Instantly, the boar was dazed and stared blankly back at Zero.

"You're lucky you aren't going to be eaten after attacking me, you hunk of meat. Be grateful, and don't show yourself again."

As Zero chastised the boar, the vines restraining it smoothly slithered back into the ground. Freed, the boar trotted back into the woods, with Zero watching it hungrily. "Well then." She turned her gaze toward the sky. Simultaneously, I saw something behind the trees by chance.

"—There!"

I spoke sharply, and Zero made a movement as if she were stringing a bow. It was "Staim". Three shafts of light appeared in Zero's hand and bore through the air, heading for one tree. All three arrows lanced through the bark, and a shrill scream rang out.

Alright. One way or another, I'd gotten used to seeing magic. Or rather, my sense of fear was partially subdued. If I got scared every time I saw magic, my body wouldn't be able to take it. Seeing the figure that tumbled out from behind the tree, I shivered from head to toe and delivered a low growl. I had seen that gaudy blond hair before...

"Ya bastard...you're the witch that was chasin' me yesterday, eh?"

"Mercenary, wait!"

I unsheathed my sword. It was a good opening to strike, as my opponent was off-balance. Nevertheless, Zero abruptly reined me in.

"That is a child."

"A child—"

I reserved my judgement and scowled down at the groveling blond. It was true that it was small, and one could say it looked like an innocent child. This was the person I'd run away from that frantically yesterday?

My thoughts quickly filled with pity. I gently sheathed my sword, and Zero motioned for me to stay where I was as she approached the small witch with great strides.

"You're a feisty one, eh? Were you the one that set that boar after us?"

"Why—why did you have to interfere?! You're a witch!"

The groveling witch didn't answer the question, but gave a sharp yell and glared at Zero.

“Do you know how valuable the heads of fallen beasts are to witches? I *needed* that head! Why did you interfere?!”

“Because this is my mercenary. I’d be troubled if he were to die.”

“I set my eyes on him first! You stole him away from me!”

I was startled.

*Did he just say “I”<sup>4</sup>? That witch just now. I thought that all magic users had to be female because they were called “witches”, but apparently this young boy was a witch as well. Now that I think about it, wasn’t Thirteenth a guy too? Does that mean there’s no relationship between gender and magical ability?*

“It doesn’t matter who set whose eyes on him first. What matters is who possesses him at this time. I wouldn’t give a tyke like you a single hair from his tail. And even if I gave you a hair, I wouldn’t give you his head.”

“What—?!”

“To a pseudo-witch like you who can’t handle a single ‘Staim’, it would be an item far exceeding your aptitude. You should give up. With your strength, never mind me, you probably couldn’t even kill my mercenary.”

These people talked about people’s heads as if they were mere trade goods. I was annoyed, but it did not feel right for me to butt in, so I stayed silent. I valued my life over my pride.

“That’s why...”

The young boy gripped the dirt.

“That’s why I need his head!”

The boy got up, yelling.

“No matter what it takes, I must get stronger!”

He pulled out something from the bag at his waist, crushed it with his hands, and scattered it around him. Moments later, his clothes and hair began dancing as if caught by the wind, and the air vibrated with a strange, high-pitched noise.

“Bug, do, gu, raat—gather, world-destroying conflagration<sup>5</sup>; burst and burn!”

It was a spell. He was trying to use magic. If I didn’t kill him first, he would kill me. I gripped the handle of my sword.

“Ho. He’s going to use «Flagis»? —Interesting.”

---

<sup>4</sup> The blond magic user used the (generally) male first person pronoun “boku”.

<sup>5</sup> In Buddhism, the cataclysmic inferno signaling the end of the world.

Zero's muttering brought my movement to a halt. The slight squinting and that smirk—it was how she had acted yesterday. I froze at the sight of her. The boy, meanwhile, spread his arms as if he were dancing, embracing the air. Fire in the shape of a snake coiled around his body, gathering between his hands.

“The Book of Hunting, verse six: «Flagis»! Sanction this! My name is Albus!”

The boy cried out. Zero drew in a small breath.

“«Rejection». Sanction this—I declareth myself to be Zero.”

Everything went silent, but that in itself spoke volumes. The flames, which had seemed like they were going to explode, dissipated in that moment, and the youth stared at his faltering hands with a look of confusion.

“How...why?! Why, why, why...?! The spell was taking effect!”

The boy shouted as if he were on the brink of bursting into tears. His shoulders quaked as Zero approached.

“Uh...”

“Don’t underestimate me, brat. That is mine. My magic. My sagacity, my power. To attempt to wield it against me is absurd.

“What-that’s...what are you...”

“The technique of using the power of words and sacrifices to harness the power of demons without summoning them—last night, you made a big fuss about how you learned it from “the Book of Zero”, did you not? *I am that Zero. I wrote that book.*”

As if pressured by Zero’s silence, the boy backed up a step. He sat down listlessly, dumbstruck.

—Wait a second.



*Zero wrote that book? The book that's gonna destroy the world?*

"...Mercenary."

"Ah! Uh, oh, me? What?"

Just as taken aback as the boy, I literally jumped at being addressed so abruptly.

"I would like to hear an explanation from this youngster. What do you think?"

"What do I think...why're ya—"

"askin' me?" I was about to say, but was bewildered. I hated witches, and this kid had tried to take my life. We were going to hear from him, so Zero wanted to take my wishes into consideration.

If she had ignored me and continued on her own, I could have grumbled unhappily, but since she was paying heed to my opinion, I couldn't just bluntly refuse her. I roughly scratched the back of my head, and grunted out a short "do as ya like."

"...Just don't give 'im any roast bird."

"Sure. I feel the same way."

*Kuku*, Zero laughed. The boy's stomach gave a great rumble in concert.

I exchanged glances with Zero and gazed at the boy's crimson face.

"...We're not givin' ya any?"

A few minutes later, Zero and the boy were stuffing their faces with the browned bird. Needless to say, I was forced to look on with an empty stomach.

## **Chapter 3 - The Coven of Zero**



# 三章 ゼロの魔術師団

## Part 1

“I was taught how to use magic by the ‘Coven of Zero.’”

The boy named Albus spoke while stuffing his face with roast bird.

Actually, “named” wasn’t really the right term to use here, as he seemed to be using an alias. I didn’t really get why he was operating under a false name, but I would probably just get lectured by Zero and Albus both about how one’s real name was extremely important in sorcery and to conceal it as such if I asked.

“The ‘Coven of Zero’ ... sounds kinda like a guild or a mercenaries’ association.”

“It might have the same meaning as a guild in that it’s a union for a profession. Learning magic is compulsory for every member belonging to the coven. There are those who agree to do so willingly, and there are those who get punished.”

Albus pulled down his collar to reveal a choker inset with a gleaming red gemstone.

Being a greedy mercenary, I couldn’t help but think: *that sure looks valuable.*

“This is proof of membership in the ‘Coven of Zero’. Everyone receives one at the entrance ceremony. It’s meant to be a symbol of loyalty to ‘that person’. Every member of the coven takes a witches’ blood oath swearing faithfulness to them.”

“Who’s ‘that person’?”

“The person who, ten years ago in Wenias, founded the ‘Coven of Zero’. We don’t know what they look like or what their name is, so everyone just refers to them as ‘that person’.”

In other words, the same person who stole ‘The Book of Zero’ from the ‘Forest of the Bowed Moon’ ten years ago came to Wenias and founded the ‘Coven of Zero’. Although I didn’t know for sure what their objective had been, considering that the witches of Wenias were revolting at the moment, it wasn’t particularly difficult to see what their goal may have been.

“‘That person’ possessed integrity in addition to a lordly air, and did not discriminate between people. It doesn’t matter if you’re a witch or just a normal human. As long as you have the required talent, they will teach you how to perform magic. Because of this, magic spread like wildfire through this country. There are actually a lot of homeless and orphans in the coven too.”

“So,” Albus transitioned, “going back to the ‘Book of Zero’; that’s the sacred text of the ‘Coven of Zero’. It has been for ten years. That’s why I would know so much about the book ‘that person’ wrote...”

Albus turned his gaze to Zero, who shrugged lightly.

“It has binding of ebony and hinges of gold, yes? Then there is no question that it was I who wrote that book.”

Zero’s response was smooth... For whatever reason, it seemed like she wasn’t going to tell Albus that it had been stolen. That was probably a smart choice. If she had gone and said that the book which they were treating as a sacred text had been stolen property, anyone would have resisted that claim. Right now, Albus looked caught between trusting Zero and condemning her. He seemed to be realizing that her competency in magic was leagues above his.

“—Do you find it hard to believe?”

Looking down, Albus slowly shook his head.

“I don’t know...but you used magic...what if you really are...”

Albus immediately turned his eyes toward Zero.

“You’re one of us...aren’t you?”

Zero gave a small smile to the bashful Albus. She gave neither an affirmation nor a denial. Albus, taking her silence as agreement, nodded in contentment.

“So? Why is this ‘Coven of Zero’ inciting rebellion against the kingdom?”

“...It’s because we couldn’t take it anymore.”

All of a sudden, it was as if a shadow was cast over Albus’ expression. It was like night and day compared to his liveliness when talking about the coven and ‘that person’ just moments before. A horribly chilly feeling emanated from him.

“Since the olden days, there have been many witches living in Wenias. They made medicines, performed divinations, and had working relationships with the villagers. In exchange for their medicines and divinations, they received bread and sweet pastries from the villagers.”

He was talking about the so-called ideal state of coexistence between witches and humans. I’d heard about the miracle medicines of the witches and the divinations for finding lost items. Witches like these were called ‘white witches’, and I’d even heard tales of villagers protecting them from witch hunts.

“From the start, the witches of this country didn’t know any sorcery besides those for performing benign tasks like these. But in the end, humans couldn’t see witches as anything but very embodiments of evil, blamed every misfortune on them, and hunted them down. We couldn’t stand a society like that anymore. They took every opportunity there was to kill us, even though we had done nothing wrong! That’s the reason why the ‘Coven of Zero’ was established!”

Albus explained all this bitterly. Those gold-colored eyes of his were dyed clearly with anger and resentment. They seemed to be saying that he had trusted humans, but that they had betrayed him in return.

“Ya witches ain’t as innocent as ya say you are. The reason why witch hunts began was ‘cause witches spread plague all over the place. Ya heard about it, right? When they burned one of those witches at the stake, a crazed group of ‘em would burn a whole village down to the ground for revenge.”

I’d heard that an event, called the ‘Revels of Revenge’, was the reason why this country had started hunting down witches. If that was the case, then these witch hunts were simply the witches reaping what they had sown. The witches spread plague and took revenge when one of their own was killed for it, so it wasn’t any surprise that large-scale witch hunts began to take place.

Of course, Albus flared up at me for the implication in my words.

“—Plague? Where’s the proof that witches infected people with plague?”

“I don’t care. I only heard it as a rumor. But there must’ve been proof somewhere for them to have started burnin’ witches.”

“Since you don’t know anything—don’t speak irresponsibly, fool! There isn’t any proof. The only ‘proof’ they have is that there was a witch living near the village from which the plague spread! But they, with their scant evidence, captured that lone witch and burnt them to death! For bastards like those, only burning down their village would do!”

“Burning down their village...eh?”

## Part 2

I let a look of scorn creep onto my face as Albus spoke angrily.

“In other words...you guys did it, di’n’tcha? I dunno if ya witches did it outta revenge’r what, but ya brought the witch hunts on yerselves when ya massacred the people livin’ in that village.”

“That’s...! But...then, did you want us to take the murder of one of our own lying down?”

“That’s not what I meant. But ta burn down a village just fer killin’ one witch? A village for a witch...I see how it is. That’s an equivalent exchange, for sure.”

I sneered as Albus, clearly shivering, let his golden eyes quiver in their sockets.

“That’s...nevertheless...!”

“Listen here, sonny. Were the dead villagers or their babies involved with the witch hunts? Was anyone who lived in that village a target for revenge? What about the innocent villagers? What about the villagers that just happened to be there? Or, didja pick ‘n choose who to kill? I didn’t think so.”

“That’s...!”

“If it was okay for ya to slaughter the people who lived in that village without distinction, then it’s okay for them ta kill you witches without distinction too. In the end, it’s just them takin’ revenge for yer revenge, so in other words it’s a just war. Against the witches, that is. I don’t care whether the humans or the witches started the conflict...but what turned the skirmishes into war was the ‘Revels of Revenge’. You witches started this fight. There’s no changin’ that reality.”

Albus pursed his lips and glared at me with hatred. Did I go too far? The sorcerer was but a kid after all.

“Still...Solena tried to save the village...!”

Trying to stem the frantic flow of built-up tears from his eyes, Albus managed to squeeze out a sentence.

“Solena?”

Albus scowled doggedly as I repeated the name back to him.

He seemed more hurt than angry.

“The great Solena...she was the witch who was killed. The witch who became the cause of the ‘Revels of Revenge’.”

“Ah...”

“She was the finest witch in the kingdom. The eldest and the gentlest—she was truly a great witch! There wasn’t a disease she couldn’t cure, so every single one of Wenias’ renowned witches received lessons from her. She saved so many people’s lives!”

I see. So she had been the witches’ kingpin. As I came to such an understanding—

“She was known as ‘the witch of the Lunar Chant’.” Zero supplemented.

“The witch...of the Lunar Chant?”

“Witches are divided into different factions with varying approaches toward sorcery. Other than that though, we all still deal in the same currency, and have artisans and blacksmiths all the same.”

“Ah...well, okay.”

It was just like how we mercenaries had different tastes in weapons and battlefields. Even though we were speaking of witches and sorcery, there was nothing out of the ordinary about such trivial divides.

“The witches of the Lunar Chant are a faction which often come into contact with humans and pay heed to their requests. For that very reason, their faction excels at inventing new ways to apply sorcery to a variety of situations and produces many revolutionary practices. These include incense for warding off bad dreams, and stones for rainmaking. So, being the birthplace of the Lunar Chant faction, Wenias is home to many widely renowned witches. The great Solena was like their patron—I would have liked to meet her.”

“Yeah.” Albus nodded proudly.

“Solena was a kind witch. A year ago, she visited a village plagued by disease and used sorcery to try and save them. Even so, she was accused of spreading the infection—and killed! Isn’t that unfair?!”

“You can say what ya want, but talk is cheap. Who knows if she did or didn’t do it?”

Hearing this, Albus’ eyes filled with bloodlust.

“How dare you insult—!”

“Calm down, youngster. The mercenary meant no insult. This is simply how the world sees it. The world lives in fear of witches. Killing him out of rage will only serve to promote that fear and cast the rest of us as evil.”

“But—!”

Forming an objection, Albus pursed his lips. He seemed to understand that there was no way to convince me otherwise.

*Sorry, but I loathe witches by nature. I don’t feel like agreein’ with a witch.*

However, I did manage to grasp the big picture of the conflict. Humans had killed the Wenian witches’ representative, which caused the bottled-up rage of the witches, who had endured witch hunts to that day, to erupt. This then caused the “Revels of Revenge”, which only made the people more fearful toward witches, and in response to the wide-scale witch hunts resulting from that fear, the Coven of Zero rebelled, and warfare against the state began.

“‘That person’ is fighting to bring peace to us witches...to purge this country of witch hunts! That’s why even Solena’s granddaughter joined the Coven of Zero.”

“...Witches can have grandchildren?”

“Yeah, of course.” Albus gazed at me contemptuously. It seemed that he thoroughly disliked me.

“Witches are human too, so we do have kids and grandkids. So, since ‘that person’ didn’t reveal themselves, she, a direct descendant from Solena, was entrusted to lead the Coven of Zero. She can’t consult with ‘that person’ so she doesn’t give orders per se, but it’s important to have a leader people can look up to.”

*I see*—so she was a figurehead. Even so, the dead Solena’s granddaughter was probably enough to unite the coven as a just cause worth fighting for.

“She’s absolutely beautiful! She’s clever too, and brave. She’s just like Solena!”

From his sullen mood, Albus made a complete turnaround as he, eyes gleaming, rambled on about the charms of the “symbol of revenge” that he served. In complete adoration, Albus looked as if he had an itch along his spine. This guy wasn’t fighting out of loyalty to ‘that person’—he had ulterior motives toward a certain woman all along!

## Part 3

“She’s a quick learner, slender and tall...her rack is huge too!”

*I see.* I suddenly wanted to meet her too... not for any particular reason, of course.

“After Solena’s death, everyone realized that there was no way witches and normal humans were gonna get along without fighting. It was time to stand up for ourselves. People said that if we didn’t show our strength, then we’d just keep getting hunted down for sport.”

“Eh, sure.”

From what I’d heard, up until the “Revels of Revenge” a year ago, there were practically no witch hunts at all. Humans had just disinterestedly continued their coexistence with the witches. But disinterested was disinterested. Though humans relied on witches, they came to the silent agreement that getting involved with them was a bad idea and blamed witches for anything and everything bad.

So humans weren’t really treating the witches as they should have. Lots of humans believed that by killing them, it would solve the problems they blamed them for. This belief, too, was internalized.

Is it really surprising that witches would be unhappy with that kind of coexistence?

And so, ten years ago, Wenias’ witches gained the power of magic from the Book of Zero. It took five years to learn to use, so ten years was long enough for it to proliferate throughout the nation.

The embers of conflict had been lit, and now they had means to their motive. If, in such a situation, hostilities broke out, there would be no return to dispassionate and peaceful coexistence.

“That’s why I decided to fight to protect the serenity of our way of life. But war with the kingdom’s already begun, and I need to do something, or else everyone’ll be slaughtered. But I’m still weak...”

“And that is why you desire the head of a fallen beast?” Zero murmured.

Albus let out an embarrassed chuckle.

*That ain’t a laughin’ matter. You were gonna bring a bloody end to my life!*

“Yep. The head of a fallen beast is the best sacrifice there is, right? If I had that as an offering, I should be able to perform all sorts of high-level magic. You cast ‘Staim’ without saying the spell earlier, right? I hadn’t even imagined that someone could nullify my magic on top of that. You’re amazing!”

Shooting a look of envy at Zero, Albus sighed.

He was acting just like a dreaming, power-hungry kid.

“My affinity for magic isn’t bad, though. I did learn how to use it pretty fast. It’s just that my magical power is kinda low... Even when I follow the Book of Zero’s instructions for higher-level magics to the letter, I still can’t get them to work...”

“Ain’t it the book that’s wrong then?”

What I said was pretty harsh, but Zero didn’t seem bothered.

“Everything is as it should be. There are certain mechanisms implemented into the book as safety measures. They prevent greenhorns with low magical capacity from performing high-level magic.”

“So what’s magical capacity?”

“Well, to put it into words, it would be physical strength. Strength will allow you to perform even magic you are unversed in. And so there have been incidents where witches have performed magic beyond their means with quality offerings and had their magic run out of control.”

“With my head, huh?”

“Yes. With your head. My ‘Rejection’ is also one of the safety measures I created in anticipation of such events. It operates by calling on the power of a high-ranking demon in order to cancel out the magic of a lower-ranking one.”

Just as I was digesting that information, Albus turned toward me, eyes gleaming.

“So what you’re saying is that I’m still weak, but with an amazing offering like a fallen beast’s head, I could use powerful magic when I really need to? If those witch-hunting guys ever come, I could protect everyone! So please! Give me that head!”

“Stop jokin’ around or I’ll kill ya, stupid kid.”

I punched him with my fist.

“Gyah!” cried Albus, tearfully wrapping his arms around his head.

“Aren’t ya fifteen or somethin’? Shouldn’t ya be worryin’ about protectin’ yer family first before talkin’ about savin’ anythin’ else? Aren’t yer parents worried ‘boutcha?”

“That’s got nothing to do with you. When there’s a need to fight, kids’ll help too.”

“Oh, is that right? You’re a stubborn one, aren’t ya? So...what now, Mr. Witch?”

*Are you gonna take the book back?* was what I was really implying.

But just as Zero had foretold, things weren’t going to be that simple.

“—Where is the ‘Book of Zero’ now, youngster?”

“Well...of course it’s at the academy...”

“Academy?” I asked.

“Hideout.” Albus curtly corrected himself. It seemed to mean the same thing as Zero’s “hole in the ground”.

“May I ask you to guide us? I still have some use for the grimoire.”

“Sure!” Albus grinned. “The Coven of Zero turns away no one but those bearing ill will!”

## Part 4

After finishing off most of the roast bird, we set off along a small path through the woods and made it to a main road paved with sandstone. Our destination was the hideout—er, “academy”—where the Book of Zero was being kept.

Albus told us that it was two days away if we took a direct path through the woods, but we decided to go to Foamicaum first.

Albus wanted to bypass the city entirely and head directly for the academy, but I had some things to take care of in Foamicaum.

Foamicaum was a required stop for travelers heading for the capital, Prasta. Wenias' border guards had told me that I'd be checked to see whether or not I went to Foamicaum when I arrive at Prasta's fortified city walls.

In short, if I didn't get proof of entry from Foamicaum before I got to Prasta, they'd think me suspicious for wanting to avoid a major city, whatever the reason.

We were heading for Albus' academy for the time being, but our ultimate goal was to go to Prasta and search for Thirteenth, so we needed to take this detour. Although I was already leading around a witch, I still wanted try and stick to the straight and narrow by minimizing abnormalities.

Zero and I strolled along in single-file while Albus walked alone far ahead.

He looked like a complete kid as he stopped to pluck grass and stuff frogs into his bag, but when Zero explained that "he seems to be collecting offerings", my impression of him took a complete turnaround. *He might look like a kid, but he's really an untrustworthy sorcerer.* We were making a sorcerer like that take us to the witches' stronghold.

*Seriously, that's depressing.* Zero was probably planning to infiltrate the Coven of Zero and take back her book, but I wondered if things were going to go that smoothly. If things went well, would my head still be safe?

I may have let my inner thoughts show in my expression.

"Why the long face? Witches would not lay a finger on the possessions of another. As long as it is known that you are my manservant, none will attempt to behead you."

"That'd be great, but...it'd be all over if a group of 'em tried to take my head."

"Even if something like that were to happen, you would have nothing to fear. I will protect you."

"That's reassuring."

"Do you think I am lying?"

"Do ya think that I think you're tellin' the truth?"

Zero paused for a second as if in thought and smiled cheerfully, saying: "no, I do not think you would."

"A hundred years of loneliness and a hundred betrayals—those alone make a truly tough warrior. To trust and rely on someone leads to reduced self-sufficiency, which leads to negligence, which leads to death. That is why I shall not ask that you trust me. I will protect you of my own volition. You are necessary to me."

"That's...reassuring."

Without meaning to, I let my true thoughts leak out. Returning my gaze to what was in front of me, I scratched the back of my head.

## Part 5

—Things were progressing at an uncomfortable pace. I'd never had anyone tell me anything like "I'll protect you" or "you're necessary to me" before.

Ahead of us, Albus seemed irritated as he stopped and waited for us to catch up. Unfortunately, Zero stubbornly walked at a snail's pace.

"...You should be worried 'bout yerself; 're ya gonna be alright?" I asked.

Zero cocked her head strangely and looked at me questioningly.

"I know yer a strong witch 'n all, but we're talkin' about a group of witches who've learned magic from the Book of Zero. You ain't gonna be beaten at yer own game, are ya?"

"Ho...are you concerned for me?"

"Ya want me to explain?"

"What, that you are infatuated with me?"

"That ain't it!" I yelled.

Zero laughed loudly.

"If you are worried that I will die without fulfilling my end of our agreement, then worry not. There is not a one in a million chance that I will be defeated. I have also thought ahead to a worst-case scenario. Even if I alone am not sufficient, mine and Thirteenth's power would be a force with which none of the masses of mock witches can compete."

"Thirteenth ain't here," I muttered. Sure, they were fellow students, but Zero seemed awfully trusting of him.

No—it wasn't a matter of trust. Either way, it was obvious that they shared a bond, although what kind of bond they shared was beyond me. My train of thought stopped there, and I shook my head, disconcerted.

*Zero and Thirteenth shared a bond—what of it? That's got nothing to do with me.*

*I should be thinking about other, more meaningful things. Right, for example—*

"Hey, if there're men who can use sorcery, why're you guys called witches?"

*Uwah...I just asked that stupid question aloud, didn't I?*

Even so, Zero answered my dumb question without hesitation.

"You misunderstand the order of events. In the past, female magic users were termed witches in order to differentiate them. So, in other words, witches were originally few in number."

"Huh...first time I've heard that."

"You see, my mercenary, sorcery is, at its roots, a branch of learning. And branches of learning are always created by men. But of course, even if men were the creators, that would not mean that men in particular excel in the field, yes?"

"Hm, seems right."

"Well, the same can be said for sorcery; many women made great progress in the field, and the men did not like that one bit. They mocked skilled female sorcerers by calling them 'witches'. Driven away, witches settled across the globe, and this diaspora led to sorcery being introduced to the wider world. This means that most of the world learned of sorcery from female sorcerers. Thus, the word 'witch' became synonymous with the word 'sorcerer', according to what I have heard. Because of such a sequence of events, there are many more witches nowadays, although male sorcerers certainly exist. And that existence sometimes yields, for better or for worse, dreadful power."

"...Like Thirteenth?"

"Correct," Zero nodded. Her voice sounded strangely sleepy and sweet.

## Part 6

*Ah, so it applies to both genders.* I breathed a sigh.

"Did something happen, mercenary? Is it possible that you are jealous?"

"Don't flatter yerself. I just feel like throwin' up from how fond ya sound."

As I licked the tip of my nose, Zero's shoulders shook with laughter.

"If you hear fondness in my words, then I am sure it is jealousy. I was simply speaking of him as a man worthy of acting as my coworker."

"Yer definition of 'coworker' prob'ly ain't the same as mine, as I'm a merc."

"Then it should be no surprise that working with him so closely has enticed my fancy. Thirteenth is an adept sorcerer. Sly and devious, he is indeed a wicked sorcerer of a man."

"I'm beginning to see that you're plenty evil yerself."

"I'm hardly comparable to him. You would know if you met him, but even I would pale before him."

"Can ya really trust someone like that...?"

"It is impossible to say. He is an adept sorcerer, but he is the embodiment of pure utilitarianism and egoism. One could almost call him demonic."

Unexpectedly, Zero's voice was filled with tenderness as she spoke about this "Thirteenth".

"Then let me ask ya for reference...when ya say 'coworker', whaddaya mean? Are ya talkin' about livin' together? Ya mentioned it was in some cave."

"Right. The study of sorcery, mercenary, is fundamentally bothersome. Sharing knowledge is mutually beneficial toward its research, so there are many witches who live together in hiding. We were the same. Thirteenth and I were a constant pair; we had arguments together, researched together, even fought together."

*In the end, it wasn't mere fondness, was it?* Hoping to change the topic from Thirteenth to something else, I pressed onward.

"Whaddaya do when yer studyin' sorcery?"

"Well, to learn to summon demons, we peruse tomes, learn, study, and repeatedly experiment."

"What a scholar..."

"Yes, witches are scholars. Sorcery is a science after all, and sciences take time to learn. It also takes great work to apply learned sorcery. There are certain cases in which rituals requiring up to a year's worth of preparation time are needed. That is why witches are not prospering, and why the spread of sorcery has stagnated. And that is why—in that war five hundred years ago—the witches were defeated by the Church."

"But now ya have magic. Can't ya win now? Against the Church, that is."

"Hm?" Zero made a questioning noise.

"Ah—that may be possible...it is just such a troublesome ordeal that I had never even given any thought to it..."

Just then, the sound of a horse-drawn cart's wheels grew closer behind us, and I guided Zero out of the way, toward the edge of the road. The luggage-loaded cart passed by us—then abruptly slowed to a speed we could match at a walking pace. When we caught up with it, I found a friendly middle-aged merchant smiling at me from the driver's seat. It was my first time experiencing something like this.

"Ah, just as I thought. Laddie, you're a fallen beast, aren'tcha? You're here to help out with the witch hunts, eh? Thanks a bundle. The way things are right now, no matter where I go, I'm always shivering in my clothes wondering if witches are goin' to attack."

"Back in the old days," continued the merchant, "we were on good terms wi'them witches. I heard that, around the time when I was born, my Grandpappy went to Solena's for medicine. Apparently he'd broken out into a real bad fever. It's like a fairy tale that actually happened."

"—Didn't they burn that witch at the stake? 'Cause she'd caused some epidemic."

Hearing that, the merchant frowned. Albus, too, drew closer, once he realized what was going on. He maintained some distance, but situated himself so that he could hear the conversation.

Suddenly, I had an idea. According to Albus, Solena had used sorcery to protect a village from the plague. If that was true—

"Hey...ain't there a chance that Solena used sorcery ta cure the plague?"

The merchant's eyes opened wide. He then wrinkled his brow and slowly shook his head.

"There is. Er, there was, but...not anymore."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"No one'd think badly of me if I got into a brawl, right? Before the Revels of Revenge, there were lots of people criticizing the ones who burnt Solena to death. They were sayin' that 'there's no way Solena'd infect people with disease.' But after the village was burnt to a crisp, everyone began to support the witch hunts—myself included."

Looking exhausted, the merchant fished around the cargo in his driver's seat and tossed me some fruit, which landed with a *plop*.

The merchant said that they were overripe and couldn't be sold. Just as he said, the fruit were mottled with brown patches and gave off a sickeningly sweet scent.

"But, everyone's rather weary of it all. We don't want it to go on any longer, but we don't want to lose either. That's why I look forward to it."

Leaving his sentence there, the merchant sped up his cart again. The cart travelled out of sight before I could say "ah", yet Albus kept his gaze on the back of the cart until it vanished out of sight.

Due to rain, we were forced to spend an all-nighter in a deserted house. We stopped at the first house we saw on a side path from the main road, and discovered that it was empty after meaning to borrow the barn for the night.

Starting a fire on the stove, I began making a simple meal of boiled oats in salted water. It would normally take time to start a fire on the stove, but with Zero's magic, lighting the stove became frighteningly simple. Magic sure was convenient.

"Hey, can't I use that? 'Leks', I think it was."

"That would be impossible. Even if you tried reciting the spell, I doubt that anything would happen."

Being told that I didn't have the talent for the Book of Hunting made me slightly depressed. If it could let me light fires without flint, I could hold interest in even the frightening magic employed by witches.

"What determines if ya have the talent for magic anyway?"

"How much karma you have accumulated, I would think. Your mental fortitude and personality—things such as those. I already explained that the grimoire is composed of four books, but one can also be gifted in some, yet inept in others. For example, in exchange for his complete ineptitude in the Book of Safeguarding, Thirteenth is unnaturally skilled in the Book of Capturing."

"Yer tryin' ta say...?"

"It is most likely because of his obsession with material things. Once he acquires something, he will never let it go."

"Hey, is that guy really okay? Can ya really depend on him?"

I knew I couldn't conceal my concern. Zero responded lightly with "I wonder," and cackled.

"Do you want to try some magic from other books? The Book of Hunting is out of the question, but other books like the Book of Capturing may still prove of use. It is the most effective for capturing prey alive. You can catch many, many fish too."

"I'm gonna stop here. If I find out that I've got no talent in any of the books, I'm gonna have my feelings hurt."

"Even if you have no talent, if you pursue it for ten years, you may still be able to perform basic magic. I can assign you studies as well. That will give me an excuse to stay with you forever."

I almost overturned the pot. What was this woman going on about all of a sudden? I looked down on her, mildly taken aback, but she did not seem as if she were kidding.

"Hey...with you sayin' that, it seems ta me like ya wanna be with me forever."

"What are you so astonished about? Surely that was what I said. It is enjoyable to be with you."

It was a good thing I was clad in fur. I'd be colored an unsightly crimson if I weren't. These lines from a witch with such an off personality made my face flush.

“Is there something wrong, mercenary?”

“There ain’t anythin’ wrong! Anyhow, I’m not gonna use magic!”

Yelling, I pushed Zero away into a corner of the room and concentrated on making dinner.

“Say, Miss Witch...”

It was a while after we had finished dinner—I was slicing the merchant’s fruit in half with a knife, putting one half in my mouth and tossing the other to Zero, who happily bit into it.

Albus said that he “needed some fresh air,” and ventured outside into the pitch-black downpour.

I could see that he disliked sharing the same space with me. I saw that he couldn’t take the insults to Solena, and he’s always glaring at me, so it would seem that he’s being vigilant.

“Speakin’ truthfully, whaddaya think? Do ya think Solena really started that epidemic?”

“Are you asking me, a witch, about that?” Zero asked cheerfully.

I shrugged and answered.

“There ain’t anyone else around ta ask.”

“—Then, mercenary, you will be asking me all sorts of things from now on, yes?”

“If yer tellin’ me ta shut up, then I’ll shut up.”

“No, that is not what I am saying.” Zero shook her head. She moved from her corner and sat down beside me with a *thump*. Sitting there, she rested her back on my shoulder and hugged her knees.

“I am happy, mercenary. Talking to you like this, I cannot help but be happy. You ask, and I answer. This way, each of us learns more about the other. —If you had someone else to pose questions to, then I would be horribly lonely.”

I didn’t say anything, but silently chewed my piece of fruit. Zero did the same, making sound as she chewed.

“Hey, why’re ya silent? Hurry up and answer.”

“Hm?”

“The question. —I believe I asked you.”

“Ah,” Zero laughed, “then I have no choice but to answer it. The likelihood that Solena caused the plague is decidedly low.”

“What makes ya say that?”

“Because, had she done so, she would have reaped no benefit.”

Twisting her neck looking down, Zero licked the fruit juice from her fingers.

“Plague sorcery is rudimentary sorcery. Although a novice witch may want to test it out, it is not something the witch of the Lunar Chant, of all witches, would. Especially since it would mean becoming the target of a witch hunt.”

“...So you’re sayin’ that when witches cause plague, it’s just them tryin’ somethin’ out?”

“If it is not done on request, then yes. On top of what has been said so far, a witch who establishes relations with neighboring humans often receives clothing and food for her divinations. So if a village is decimated by the plague, it would be to their disadvantage.”

*Hmm*, there are stories about how villages with thieves are, on the contrary, safe; locations with witches seemed to be the same.

“I do not claim that witches are kind. Witches often seek scenarios with the best outcomes for themselves. However, because of this, the possibility that the witch of the Lunar Chant was the bringer of the plague is low indeed.”

If we assume that, then humans really did mistakenly burn the very witch who had been protecting them at the stake. It was just that exactly at the time of the plague, she had been a sorcery-practicing witch. That was their only rationale.

—I had gone through similar experiences. I was falsely accused of murder and rape just because I was a fallen beast, and driven out of town. These occasions were not at all uncommon.

Assuming that Solena had been killed by the residents of the village she had set out to save, imagining the sadness and anger that had arisen was not a difficult task. So of course the witches had risen in a rage, and sunk the village in a sea of fire.

—If that was true, then it was the humans who had started the war.

“Even among witches, there is diversity, mercenary. There are witches who would harm humans, and those who work for the good of all.”

I had been prejudiced. I had thought that all witches were evil, that they left not a single survivor from their wrongdoings.

*Achoo!* A sneeze sounded outside the door. Albus entered the room, looking cold. From the unpleasant look on his face, I could tell that he had been eavesdropping.

But I didn’t pester him about it. No, instead—

“Sorry ‘bout that, insultin’ ya ’n all...”

Albus opened his eyes wide as if surprised, and frowned stubbornly. However, it was a frown of someone trying to stop their expression from softening.

“Well, idiots have misunderstandings all the time, and I’m pretty generous, so I’ll let you off the hook. So next time, think before you speak, alright?”

I felt like hitting him for a moment, but decided to forgive him this time for the sake of driving home my apology.

## Part 7

The next morning, the sky was clear and cloudless, with no rain in sight. Just as he had done yesterday, Albus walked ahead of us on the path, but today he stopped frequently to tell us to hurry up.

“Hurry! The gates are gonna close!”

Ahead of us, an impatient Albus waved his fist and yelled.

Of course a town protected by walls would also have a gate. Such gates are closed at sunset, and remain so until the next morning. Still, the sun now hung at its zenith, and it would only take us a short while to reach the town. I didn’t think that there was any reason to rush, but I decided that it would be good to get there early and find my billet.

“Aren’t ya gonna hurry up?” I asked Zero.

Stubbornly maintaining a sluggish pace, Zero yawned listlessly.

“Well, I abhor sweat.”

“Eh, well...then how ‘bout this?”

“Hm? Ah...wha—hey!”

I gathered Zero into my arms and ran past Albus, leaving him in the dust.

“Hey!” Albus yelled as he ran after us. “Wait for me!”

And so, we arrived in Foamicaum.

“Form a line! Single file! Merchants should prepare their special licenses, mercenaries their letters of introduction, and the rest their entry permits! Do not delay!”

Set in a wall that seemed capable of withstanding a day’s bombardment, a two-leaf gate was open just wide enough to allow a single cart to pass at a time. In front of the gate were four gatekeepers, as if to say that anyone without an entry permit would have no chance of getting

through. One of the guards was yelling as he ordered the line of people waiting to enter, while one of the others—higher-ranked, by the different color of his uniform—kept a vigilant watch as he looked over entry permits.

“You may proceed! Next!”

With that, the frontmost-queued merchant’s unease vanished, supplanted by an expression of relief as he led his wagon onward and disappeared through the gate. We inserted ourselves midway into the line, and I felt hopelessness wash over me.

To enter any major city, one almost always needed something called an entry permit. When a villager felt the urge to embark on a journey, he first needed to visit his village chief and obtain a letter of introduction. Then, he needed to take this letter and bring it to a town’s governmental office, where he would receive an entry permit after providing his name, birthplace, and profession.

Merchants received special passes from their guilds, which were renewed when they paid a yearly fee, while mercenaries received letters of introduction by surviving battles.

But obviously, a witch and a sorcerer like Zero and Albus would have no entry permits. Meaning that I would have to request their entry as my companions, but...

How was I going to explain the rag-wearing beauty and the loser of a kid?

“I’ve always wanted to visit Foamicaum! I can’t wait!”

“Shut yer mouth. Don’t get so worked up. I’ll kill ya, ya little brat.”

“Zerooo! The mercenary’s glaring at me!”

“Don’t pick on those weaker than you, mercenary. The youngster is saying that he is fortunate to be able to travel with you. Be glad.”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“I ain’t gonna be thankful for that!”

Suspicious looks were directed toward me, as I’d raised my voice without thinking. Although I already stood out enough just by being a fallen beast, it didn’t bother me to be obtrusive. I heaved a sigh.

In the space of my sigh, the queue progressed forward, and it was my turn to talk with the gatekeeper whether I wanted to or not. I held out the letter of introduction I had been issued by the border patrol.

“I heard that yer gatherin’ troops ta fight them witches, so I’m headin’ to the capital ta help out.”

I repeated to him, somewhat stiffly, the words I had rehearsed countless times. It wasn't a lie. At least, it hadn't been two days ago; but as expected, it was difficult for me to utter those words while accompanying a witch and a sorcerer.

Sure enough, the gatekeeper honed in on Zero—who wore her hood over her eyes and whose appearance screamed “I am, without a doubt, a witch”—and Albus, who appeared frail and far too childlike to be a traveler.

“Are these two your companions? What is your relation?”

*Ah, here it comes.* It wasn't that I didn't have an excuse, but...

“Well...”

“We are his sex slaves.” Zero swiftly answered.

All of the fur on my body stood on end.

*Just a sec, this woman—*

“Y-yes! We are honored to serve our master. The two of us are but his lowly slaves. Though we perform nighttime services too...”

*Woah there, Albus. You're a guy. What're ya pullin', blushin' like that? Yer kinda cute ta begin with, so things ain't gonna turn out well. I've been made out ta be a complete pervert, haven't I?*

“I...I see...oh. Right...”

*And you, guard, investigate 'em more. Investigate 'em and figure it out. It's completely wrong. It's so wrong, but I can't say a thing. This is why people say fallen beasts 're depraved.* With a gaze that betrayed neither his fear, his hate, nor his envy, the gatekeeper looked at me and my two slaves.

“Well then...so the two slaves have nothing to declare, yes? There's a tax for each slave, however it is waived for lone travelers such as yourself. A few days ago, a small town near here was attacked by witches, so witch hunting warriors like yourself are greatly welcomed. How long will you be staying?”

“Ah—...'round...three days...I suppose...” I managed to squeeze out a few words. I didn't plan to stay any longer than a night, but it was a good idea to declare an extra two days in case anything happened.

“If you're heading to Prasta, then be sure to get a confirmation of entry stamp on your letter of introduction. And when you depart, make sure to return your sojourner's permit. —You may proceed!”

Just like that, we were granted entry into Foamicaum.

## Part 8

All's well that ends well... but still. After we had walked a distance from the gates and I had confirmed that we were far away enough, I gave both Zero and Albus a good wallop.

"I did not expect to be struck as thanks for my acumen," Zero grumbled as she rubbed the spot I had hit, surveying the dizzying hustle and bustle with great interest.

"Since ages past, warriors across the globe and across centuries have been accompanied by slaves, yes? Every book counsels to declare oneself a slave if one's identity is ever called into question. And it proved efficacious, did it not?"

Albus pouted in agreement.

"That's right! Like, if a fallen beast was going around with a shabbily dressed girl and a guy with my looks, that would be the most realistic explanation, wouldn't it?"

"Shut yer mouth! That just made me seem like a perverted bastard who likes ta *play* with his poor slaves every night! What's worse is that one of 'em is a guy, and a kid to boot! It's sleazy...I'm a symbol of sleaziness..."

"Who cares what the guard thinks, s'long as you've got your sojourner's permit...how were *you* gonna write it off then, mercenary?"

"Well, I'd...I'd do it properly."

"Properly huh," Albus spoke with a sarcastic tone. "Even if you managed to come up with some excuse, Zero's clothes are just too raggedy. Look, everyone's staring at her. Even slaves have better clothes nowadays..."

Albus took a long hard look at Zero's garb, starting from the top of her head to the toes of her feet.

That's when I noticed Zero wasn't even wearing shoes. Her robes were old, stained, and tattered. If she'd been on her own, Zero could have passed for an impoverished traveler, but I was a warrior wearing riveted leather armor, outfitted with a sword, knife, explosives, and other equipment, while Albus could pass as a neat merchant's maid. With the three of us together, it really was easiest and safest to introduce Zero as a slave.

I didn't think that there was any need for Albus to dress like a slave too... Well, since we'd already gotten into town without incident, I didn't see any point in continuing to worry over it.

"Mercenary, mercenary. What might that be?"

As if ignoring mine and Albus' ruminations, Zero gestured with curiosity—not toward something of concern—but at an impassioned pair of lovers.

They pressed their faces together under the open air, sampling necklaces and contentedly exchanging words like: “which one suits me?” It was also no surprise that they slipped in kisses whenever they could.

“I wish I could...”

“Make them stop!” I quickly corrected myself.

“They’re so into one another that they don’t even care ‘bout the stares they’re gettin’. Must be a happy couple.”

Although I’d said it myself, I still felt a pang of jealousy. But I wasn’t some saint who could live his life free from envy, and I wouldn’t be even if I were more mature. As for giving up on love, well, I’d pretty much already reached that point. But still, since Zero’d promised me a human form, I wasn’t devoid of hope for the future.

“Why do they press their lips together? Some sort of ritual perhaps?”

“...What, ya don’t know what a kiss is?”

“Kiss?”

Zero gazed in disbelief at the couple, then turned to face me again.

“A kiss is the act of pressing one’s lips to a demon’s thi—”

I clapped a hand over Zero’s mouth. I wasn’t going to let her spew stuff out in public; I had a hunch that those words were nothing but nasty. With how much Zero was struggling, it didn’t seem like it had been just a bad joke either.

“Sonny, don’t tell me you too...?”

He didn’t give me a “what”, but whipped his head left and right.

“I-I’m not that clueless about how the world works!”

“Well then, I guess that’s fine. Hey witch, ya listenin’? A kiss is a way for two people ta show their love for each other. It *ain’t* some vomit-inducing, sick thing that’s got anythin’ ta do with demons. Why’d ya think that in the first place?”

“Having been engrossed in a sea of books along with my fellow students, I have become ignorant of the customs of this world. That is the price of my wholehearted devotion to research.”

I felt that it was pretty impressive for someone like that to be quick-witted enough to come up with an excuse like “slaves”.

“That is because I am a prodigy.”

“It ain’t polite to go ‘round readin’ people’s minds.”

“What I read was not your mind, but your expression.”

“Hmph, is that so...”

“I was born within a cave, raised within that cave, and have only recently departed said cave.”

For a moment, I thought she was pulling my leg and looked over at Albus. His head was tilted in confusion as if troubled, and as I watched, he nodded. His expression said “it’s possible”. *Huh, she’s not screwing with me.* Assuming that she wasn’t, then she really wasn’t joking with her story.

I wasn’t sure how to react, so I pulled a wry face and faced Zero. However, she did not seem like she was holding back any sorrow. No. Rather, she gazed up at me as if she had been struck by some bright idea. Under her hood, Zero’s eyes glittered with boundless curiosity.

“Have you done it before, mercenary?”

“Eh? What?”

“A kiss.”

*I haven’t*, I barked in my mind.

“I haven’t!”

I did so audibly as well, albeit somewhat more loudly than I had done in my mind.

Once I had admitted this, Zero smiled and nodded, pleased.

“Then we are even. Youngster, I trust that you have not either?”

“M-me? N-no no no! There isn’t even anyone...that wants to do it with me yet...”

*How unexpected.* I felt relieved. I hadn’t lost to this guy when it came to a question of manhood.

“Love is exchanged through kisses...? Hm, most fascinating. I would like to try it out.”

So would I.

“Would you like to attempt it with me, mercenary?”

“Huh?!”

Without thinking, I looked at Zero’s lips. They were exquisitely formed, and shone like the polished ruby skin of an apple ripened to perfection. If I touched her lips with mine, it would undoubtedly be sacrilege. —No, it already was.

“Uh...I told ya it’s a way to show your love for someone...”

“That is precisely why I suggested we try it. I do like you, after all.”

“Eh...pish. Tha—“

## Part 9

“Even if you do not believe me, you did tell me to take a better attitude earlier, yes? I am a devastatingly gorgeous woman. Surely even you would like to touch these lips of mine.”

“I’m not feelin’ it anymore after that line. That, and I just don’t like witches. That stuff doesn’t work on me.”

“You are a cold man... I am left with no other choice. If mercenary finds the thought displeasing, then youngling...”

Zero looked over Albus for quite some time. He flushed crimson and hid behind me, yelling: “no, no, you can’t, I don’t wanna!”

“Don’t tease the kid. More importantly, don’t ya have a change of clothes?”

“Does it appear that I do?”

Zero spread her arms wide for inspection. I’d figured before her retort, but besides a small pouch that hung at her waist, she had no other items on her.

“How’d ya even get here like that...”

“I washed my clothes and bathed in every river I came across, caught birds when I went hungry, and picked every fruit and berry I could find. When I came across other people, I avoided them, and when it rained, I found caves to take shelter in. I salvaged a pot from a deserted village so that I could cook. Such is how I journeyed here alone.”

“Amazing, I know,” Zero said, her pride evident in her smile. I was at my wit’s end.

“Anyway... with ya lookin’ like that, we aren’t even gonna be able ta find a place ta stay. Even an inn that would accommodate someone like me wouldn’t rent us anything other than their stables.”

“I am content to sleep outside. It is most comfortable to sleep cocooned in your fur.”

“Even if it’s comfortable, it’s gonna be inconvenient. It’ll draw too much attention to us either way. It’s a crime just ta stand out.”

I wasn’t exaggerating. There were plenty of innocent people convicted and executed for simply “standing out”.

It appeared that we had to get some decent clothes for Zero. It was the most urgent problem at hand.

“Hey witch, you got any cash on ya?”

I expected her to respond in the same manner as before, perhaps with a “does it appear that I do?” But instead, Zero nodded, said “I see,” and gestured for me to hold out my hands.

As I did as I was told, Zero rummaged around in her pouch and pulled something out.

She placed it in my hands, whereupon it scattered into a small heap. It was—a bunch of gemstones.

“I departed the cave with a number of them. Bijoux hold intrinsic value in any era and any country, I believe. I thought that they might prove to be useful. Could these serve as a substitute?”

I couldn’t close my wide-open jaw. My fur bristled as I stood there, a mound of gems in my hands, unable to so much as twitch.

Albus peered into my hands as well, and adopted a wide-eyed look identical to mine.

“Ya idiot! Don’t show off somethin’ like this in the streets!”

Rapidly regaining my senses, I poured all of the jewels back into Zero’s pouch. “Wah,” Zero yelped as if she hadn’t been paying attention, and looked at me as if she were seeing something strange.

“I presented them to you in response to your question, so why are you possessed of this anger?”

“I’m just tellin’ ya to consider how much yer showin’ me and where yer doin’ it. It would’ve been more than enough ta show me just one as proof. Just the smallest gem would’ve been perfect.”

“Such as this one?” Zero spoke, extracting a minuscule gemstone. Even it possessed a startling pellucidity that would drive a pauper mad. I had thought about paying in Zero’s stead if she hadn’t the funds, but with merely the stone in her hand, our financial fortunes had taken a complete turnaround. Instead, there was now an insurmountable wall before me. As a mercenary, I was thankful that my employer was filthy rich, but as a man, I felt defeated.

Still, I hid those feelings, and in a deliberately even tone, I replied: “that’s fine.” I felt like a fool as I stood there, nodding.

“Let’s go exchange that for some coin and buy you some clothes. There should be a money changer somewhere ‘round here...”

Zero deposited the grain of a jewel into my hand and chuckled, a broad smile on her face.

“As I thought, you are a good man.”

“...Huh?”

“That’s outta the blue,” I retorted, bending my head forward. *Clink clink*, Zero patted her pouch.

“No matter what pretext you may have presented, you were most likely capable of snatching this away from me. I am quite ignorant about this world, after all.”

“Are you an idiot? There’s no way I’d have the guts ta do that to a witch who faces demons.”

“Therefore, had I not been a witch, you would have purloined it from me?”

“Course. I’m a greedy mercenary, after all.”

“Wrong. No way. No, no. Not with how you were shaking and panicking when she handed them to you.”

Albus laughed foolishly as he interrupted us. *I should give him a good whack.*

“Ow—! What? It’s the truth! Grow a pair, you coward!”

“Should I give ya another one? Huh? Ya wanna taste another one?”

“No~” Albus replied like a girl and ducked behind Zero.

*Heh heh*, Zero’s shoulders shook. Then—

“Ah—what a cerulean sky.”

Out of the blue, she said something strange. Interested, I turned my gaze skyward, where there was indeed not a cloud to be seen.

## Part 10

“I-I believe these pieces may be pleasing fits for you indeed...”

A voice which could be described only as beguiling exuded into existence. It was a voice for currying favor with others, and was loud and saccharine. It was a giant who stunk like a bandit leader—although I certainly wasn’t in any position to criticize his hygiene—speaking. We were looking through a thrift store in the run-down part of town to buy Zero some clothes.

Crooks frequented places like this to sell their stolen goods, so occasionally one would see the odd finery lying around. The purveyor was showing Zero exactly such a piece.

“Ol’ man. I thought I told ya she’s lookin’ for travellin’ clothes...”

As I studied the vibrant noblewoman’s dress, my whiskers twitched.

“As he says. I am seeking something else.”

At Zero’s words, the shopkeeper snatched up the next piece of clothing and held it up for examination.

“Ah, then this dress—“

“I toldya, travellin’ clothes! Stop pullin’ out fluttery dresses that don’t even fit her looks, ya moron!”

“Shut up, ya stupid furball! I’m talkin’ to the lady over here!”

“How ‘bout it, miss?” The man drawled in a cracked voice, the result of having had too much to drink. Zero looked over the dress held before her and refused curtly, saying: “it is not to my liking.” At her words, the shopkeeper relaxed as if spellbound, said, “Of course this raggedy dress is unbecoming of you, my lady,” and retreated further into the store.

It had been a mistake for Zero to reveal her face. It pains me to say so, but Zero is undeniably a great looker. The moment she’d stepped through the doors and pulled back her hood, the formerly chilly atmosphere within the shop had melted away into a lovestruck one, and the shopkeeper had appointed himself as her manservant.

“He’s gotta be pretty desperate to be like this...”

Albus muttered a few words at the obsequious shopkeeper, who was even now running around to try and curry Zero’s favor. “Don’t say anythin,” I let my shoulders droop.

“Unlike with kids, there’re plenty’a grown men like that...’specially the ugly ones. Even harlots won’t service ‘em. ‘Course, it’s probably a whole ‘nother story if you’re loaded with cash...”

There were plenty of men who would be thankful to merely be able to breathe the same air as a woman as beautiful as Zero. The only thing keeping me from stooping to the shopkeeper’s level was the fact that Zero was a witch, and I hated witches. If it weren’t for that, I’d probably be laying myself at her feet just as he was.

“Mercenary, mercenary.”

I felt her tugging on my sleeve and lowered my gaze.

“I feel that this is adequate.”

As she spoke, Zero pointed out a sable overcoat that was lying in a corner of the store. It was long sleeved, and I could tell that it was made for men. On Zero, the coat would probably reach halfway down her legs.

“It is well built yet light, and the added warmth will be welcome. I am pleased with the hood as well. What say you, mercenary?”

It looked heavy to hold, but was actually light and soft. Assuming the lining was well-built, then the overcoat definitely seemed to be of a sturdy make. It would function moderately well as a traveling coat. I felt that she should decide what she would wear, but it seemed that she was seeking my opinion as a well-traveled mercenary.

“It’s a good find. Ain’t half bad. It’s just a bit big—“

Zero’s face brightened.

“Good. I am pleased with this. If mercenary approves, then I do as well.”

It seemed that she placed a great deal of trust in me. If I had disapproved, would she have too?

Having been browsing around, Albus broke into a run as he headed further into the store.

“Ah, socks! Hey merc, these’ll come in handy. They’re so much simpler to put on compared to wrapping cloth over your feet! You won’t get blisters, and they warm your feet too!”

Albus held up a pair of very long socks for me to see. They would probably cover up to half of his legs if he were to wear them. It seemed that one held them in place by tying tight their decorative twines. Contrary to the overcoat, these were very ornamental pieces made for women, but they seemed sufficient for practical use. They probably protected against the cold too.

“Hey, w—“

I was about to call her “witch”, but hurriedly stopped myself.

We had company. It was probably not a good idea.

“...Zero.”

She looked up, having been examining the laid-out overcoat with a pleased look on her face.

“He found some socks.”

I exchanged a look with Albus, who grabbed the socks and ran back to where he had been.

“You still need shoes...ah! These are nice. Definitely these!”

He was as excited as if he were picking out his own pieces of clothing. Just the act of shopping was probably fun. What Albus held in his hands as he returned to us was a pair of long boots reaching up to the knees. Made out of firm leather, they would be resistant against water and mud. I rubbed Albus on the head.

“You’ve got a good eye. They ain’t bad.”

“Pooh!” Albus puffed out his chest.

Zero took a look at them, and went “hrm” in a sullen tone.

“I prefer to walk barefoot. The dirt is warm and the grass is gentle. The damp dew is also pleasant.”

“Don’t ya get bruised easy?”

"It is no problem so long as I walk slowly."

"Sometimes we're gonna need ta move quickly...if ya think I'll just carry ya in my arms every time that's the case, then you've got another thing comin'."

"Then will you leave me behind? What a heartless man."

"Do you see me as a man of deep emotions?"

"You do possess some deep fur."

"Don't make me hit ya. Anyway, you're gonna need those boots."

At my curt reply, Zero pouted in disappointment.

It took all my willpower to turn a deaf ear as Zero badmouthed me, complaining that "it would be fine for you to carry me around", "don't be so miserly", and "you are so large, and yet..."

"So with the way things are, ya can't wear any pants besides short ones, but I guess it's easier ta move around that way."

As I spoke, Albus got his hands on a ridiculously short pair of pants that looked like they belonged on a female thief. They'd probably allow for better movement, but would be severely lacking in protection for the skin. Although, with the boots, socks, and overcoat, some skimpy clothing might not matter...

"Hey, ol' man! We've decided, give us the bill!"

Hollering into the depths of the store, I saw the shopkeeper emerge, arms full with a mass of brightly colored cloth, and a disappointed look on his face.

"Change here. We're gonna burn the stuff you're wearin'. It'd just be baggage."

"What, reduce this old friend to ashes?"

"Long-term relationships ain't good for ya. You'll make new friends and lose old ones with 'em."

"What a heartless man. Although, I don't dislike that in the slightest."

Chuckling, Zero stripped and flung away her raggedy old robes.

In that moment, I stiffened. Albus' jaw dropped, and the shopkeeper fainted as blood spurted out of his nose.

Skin so pale I felt as if my eyes became saucers, and a thin waist. Such a body was more magnificent in appearance than a statue of a goddess, sculpted over a lifetime by an artist of unmatched skill, would be. It was a flawless form.

Right now, I was gazing at its full glory.

Zero had not been wearing any undergarments.

“—What? Is the female form such an exceptional sight to behold?”



## Part 11

*Whew*, I took a sharp intake of air.

The next moment, I uttered a wordless howl of confusion, and as I was raising hell, I pulled Zero's discarded robes over her. Waking the prostrate storekeeper, I gathered up the underwear we had picked out, and threw them along with Zero into the back of the store. I roared at her to stay there until she had put all of them on, whereupon she responded:

"That hurt! You are always so violent! A lady should be treated more gently!"

"If that's what ya think, then look up the word 'modesty' in a dictionary 'n take a year ta mull over what it means!"

Albus and the storekeeper were seated behind our shouting match.

"H-holy shit... holy shit...!"

"That was beautiful... I-I c'n die happy now!"

It was clear that these creatures called witches were ignorant of the world's ways. Among them, Zero seemed to be one exceptionally so.

On her were the length-challenged trousers, the long socks which reached halfway up her legs, and the enormous overcoat complete with a hood. Frankly speaking, Zero didn't look like an honest to goodness normal person, but she had made huge strides toward that goal. With her face, I felt that the staff of any high-end inn we might visit would be more than happy to lodge us in their best rooms, but considering they'd make a fuss during our stay, I decided to defer that possibility in exchange for a lodging in the boonies.

I had meant to burn Zero's old robes, but with the storekeeper loudly insisting that he would give us everything he owned for them, I worked out a deal with him to waive our bill in exchange for

the raggedy piece of clothing. It was a cloak which had spent many years in contact with Zero. Thus, it wasn't hard to imagine the value of such an item in the eyes of a middle-aged man who'd had no encounters with attractive women.

Confirming that she was fine with handing her robes over to the moronic man, Zero declared that it wasn't her problem how the friend she had bid farewell to would be treated. *She's so cold*, I thought, a laugh escaping my throat, although I was probably just as unfeeling.

"Mercenary, mercenary."

I was walking along with Zero in my arms when I felt my ears being forcefully tugged. *Ow, ya little shit of a witch.*

“I smell something scrumptious. I’m hungry.”

I looked over at where Zero was pointing. There was a side street clustered with miscellaneous shops. A row of food carts occupied a section of the street, all of them enthusiastically promoting their foodstuffs to passersby.

Some carts offered peeled fruits, while others roasted chunks of meat. I was the same as her—I was getting hungry. I was about to ask whether they wanted to stop for a meal before heading for an inn, but Albus had already dashed toward one of the carts. Zero leapt out of my arms and chased after him.

“...Wh—you guys, wait a sec! Yer leavin’ one of yer own behind!”

No matter what I howled, my words didn’t seem to reach them. I ran after them, carving a path through the crowd. When I finally caught up, I found Zero and Albus already sinking their teeth into their meals, both having ordered the same thing. Namely, well-done entrails and vegetables sandwiched between two pieces of bread, a dish of the masses.

It seemed, from the cart owner’s self-satisfied expression, that Zero had paid more money than she should have, not knowing the street price. Seeing that I was Zero’s companion, the cart owner pushed an extra-large sandwich with a slab of meat inside toward me.

“The meat is delicious, mercenary. You should try it.”

“These vegetables are so crispy! They taste so good!”

As I looked at the two of them, grease coating their mouths, faces stuffed full of bread, I thought that no amount of reprimand could correct their boorishness. I resignedly bit into my food.

It wasn’t hard to find a place to stay.

In a big town like this one, there was no shortage of inns that were willing to accommodate guests with special circumstances. The old man who ran the reception desk didn’t even bat an eye at my being a fallen beast, and we successfully obtained a room for two and a room for one for the night.

“Yer with me, sonny.”

“Eh—?! Why, I don’t wanna! I’m getting my own room.”

“No you’re not. I can’t be sure yer not gonna run that way. You’re gonna stay where I can see ya.”

“If you share a room with me, there’s a chance you’ll lose your head in your sleep, you know?”

I calmly removed a coil of rope which hung from my waist. For better or worse, I wasn't one to feel guilty for tying up a kid and dumping them in a corner.

"Z-Zero, help me!"

Letting out a miserable voice, Albus again hid himself behind Zero.

"Do not be cruel to children, mercenary."

"Then I'll share a room with Zero! It's fine as long as I'm not alone, right?"

Still clinging to Zero's back, Albus made his ridiculous request. The perverted little devil. If he thought that being a pretty boy would make me give him whatever he wanted, then he was in for a big surprise. I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and dragged his struggling form into our room.

Though Albus had struggled and protested however he could, once I threw him onto the bed and left him there, it didn't take long for him to fall asleep. He'd said that the stink of animals would keep him awake, but he surrendered to it pretty quick. Sure that he was pretending to be sleeping so that he could take something of mine, I checked to see whether he was awake, just to make sure. It seemed that he really was fast asleep.

"Seriously? That's a kid for ya."

## Part 12

Albus had to be exhausted. He probably hadn't gotten even a moment's rest for the past few days, as he'd chased me around the forest, spent a night escaping Zero's Etrauk, and attacked me once again the morning after. He probably hadn't slept well in the broken-down house last night either, so it wasn't a surprise that he couldn't resist the beckoning of a soft bed and warm sheets.

"It's not like I don't understand the feelin' of wantin' to get stronger..."

With a neatly trimmed nail, I gently poked Albus in the cheek.

As I did so, Albus frowned and curled into a ball, behaving like an animal much to my amusement. I began to feel slightly mischievous—but though he was just a kid, he was still a sorcerer.

At any rate, I had to take a bath and wash off all the filth from my long journey. It'd be weird to be too clean as a mercenary, but I didn't want to contract skin disease from being too filthy. Us fallen beasts could become infested with fleas as well.

First, I had to go find the old man at the reception desk and ask him to get some hot water prepared for me. Since I was covered in fur, washing myself was a more complicated task than

just wetting a towel and scrubbing myself with it. The only way for a mucked-up fallen beast to rid himself of dirt and fleas was to find a sufficiently-large pool of steaming-hot water and lower his entire body into it, washing his body whole.

Fantasizing about bathing in the yard before the sun went down so that I could dry myself in its rays, I was about to leave the room—but first, I decided to tie Albus securely to the bed, and made my way out of the room only after looking over my handiwork.

“Taking a bath, mercenary?”

I was in the yard.

The old man at the reception desk had made no indication whether or not he’d felt threatened by my blood-, mud-, and grass-stained self, and performed his duty perfectly.

I was handed a tub used for bathing and given three bucketfuls of hot water. It was decided that, as compensation, I would draw water from the well to replace the amount I use.

“Take this, on the house,” the old man said, handing me a bar of kneaded soap. It was obvious that it was a bar of laundry soap, but to be fair, my washcloth and fur couldn’t tell the difference. As a result, my body was covered in suds when Zero trudged toward me and squatted down beside me, as if she were seeing something very curious.

“A monster of fur and soapsuds, eh? The youngsters of the neighborhood are peeping at you from their place of hiding. Eagerly so.”

“They...they ain’t scared?”

“Fear is acquired *a posteriori*. Provided that you do not frighten them, I believe that they shall not be afraid beyond reason.”

“Well, the smaller kids’ll get scared ’n cry.”

“Beyond reason, I said. If a colossal carnivorous beast were to appear in front of a person, he or she would fear it instinctually.”

*So they are scared, aren’t they?* As I mulled over it, frowning, Zero’s gaze flitted over to their hiding place. I saw three kids peeking at me as if they were watching a show.

Baring my fangs, I roared at them, and they scattered while screaming loudly in fear.

“...Do you wish to be feared?”

“I’m not gonna be somethin’ people look forward to watchin’. —Actually, it’s better ta stay away from fallen beasts. We’re treated like monsters all our lives. So ‘course there’s plenty of us who’ve actually become monsters, ya know?”

“Humans make their monsters—yes?”

“That’s right. Well, it could just be in our nature to be monsters.”

“You are mistaken. In actuality, your soul possesses a great deal of humanity.”

“Who knows?”

I couldn’t possibly judge on my own whether or not I behaved like a human. On top of that, I couldn’t even build normal relationships with humans. Thinking about it was pointless because the point of comparison wasn’t close in the first place. Whenever I heard talk about being human and being humane, I felt like I were no longer human.

“Make not such a face. If you are not human, I will wish for the rest of the world to be the same.”

“Ta have a witch wish for somethin’ like that...”

Well, it was time to stop being gloomy. But in my mind, that meant only changing the words coming out of my mouth. I turned my gaze up at the sky and gave a small sigh, blowing some bubbles into the air. Poking at a gently drifting bubble, Zero leapt to her feet, as though she had thought of an idea.

“It must be toilsome to bathe yourself when you have such a large frame. I will aid you by washing your back.”

“Aren’t ya Ms. Generous. Didn’t ya say that ya hate ta sweat?”

“Of course, I will stop before that point. Moreover, I am sure that washing an enormous beast will be most fun.”

Without waiting for permission, Zero placed her hands on my back. She worked up a lather with the bar of soap as she ran her fingers through my fur. It tickled like hell.

“Hey, mercenary. Towns sure are fun places, are they not?”

“Ah?”

“There are lots of people, and each has his or her own duty and his or her own way of thinking, yes? This all feels very extraordinary. Not only that, but the food carts’ cuisine suits me well.”

“If that’s all ya want, anywhere in the slightly bigger towns—” I stopped mid-sentence.

Oh, right. Zero had never even taken a step outside of her cave before, much less been to a town.

That being the case, of course she’d be all amazed and excited. The congestion in the streets was annoying to me, and the food from the food carts was nothing to rave about, but from Zero’s perspective, these things were new experiences.

There was no doubt that Zero, being a witch, had more knowledge than I could even imagine.

However, she was lacking in her knowledge of the outside world. What Zero would think of as common knowledge would not be so for me, and what I thought of as normal and widely known would not be so for Zero. We may look at the same things, but we each perceive the world around us differently.

“...It’s ‘cause Wenias is a country of tourists and travelers, and Foamicaum is the heart of all that tradin’. People ’n goods come here from all over the world. It ain’t that wide in scope, but it’s condensed.

“Ah,” Zero’s eyes sparkled.

“I would not have been able to enter this city on my own. Even if I had managed to gain entry, I would most likely have caused some kind of disturbance. You have in this short time given me knowledge of things I knew not. I am thankful that we crossed paths.”

—*Was this also because she lacked common sense?* I frowned as Zero uttered her embarrassing lines, and looked over my shoulder to scowl at her.

“...You, stop sayin’ stuff like that.”

“Stuff like that?”

“Like sayin’ that ya like me, that yer thankful that we crossed paths, shitty lines like those. Women don’t just give people their favor for no reason. ‘Specially not to a man like me.”

“Favor?” Zero repeated strangely.

“But it is the truth. I enjoy speaking with you, so I find it unbearable to remain silent.”

“I just told ya ta stop that—“

“Do you find conversing with me...disagreeable?”

With a gulp, I shut up.

That wasn’t it. That wasn’t it, but...

“I don’t understand yer way of speakin’...basically, the only conversations I have are where everyone curses at ’n insults each other.”

That was why I really couldn’t understand when I was spoken to with kindness. Still frowning, I spat out.

“Is that so,” Zero muttered.

“Then it will be good to practice with me, yes? I will continue to speak often from here on out.”

No way. I wasn’t able to convince her otherwise. It didn’t seem like there was anything else to do but to just get used to it.

“Don’t get mad if I ignore ya, aight?”

“Of course I shall be angry. I wish to converse. It’s no fun to speak on my own.”

“Then get as angry as ya like.”

“You are such a heartless man. It would not hurt to behave more kindly toward me. I *am* your master, you know?”

“A mercenary doesn’t do anythin’ besides what they were hired ta do.”

“Humph,” Zero made a dispirited noise and began making strange finger movements on my back as she washed it. It felt as if she were writing something. I wondered if they were letters and tried to focus, but couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

Then, Zero chuckled.

“Somethin’ goin’ on?”

“That is a secret.”

“Oi...”

“You will know soon enough. And then you shall thank me, and unable to resist serving my will. This is that kind of a spell. Frightening, isn’t it?”

“Stop jokin’ around! Get it off me right now!”

“I-don’t-wanna. Here, turn your back toward me. I cannot wash it the way it is now.”

My threat had no effect on Zero; and if threats didn’t work, then I had no choice but to obey. I obediently turned my back toward her. Having cleaned my body thoroughly and washed all of the soapsuds off with boiling water, I felt rejuvenated. Zero looked over me and put on a troubled expression.

“All clean. Hm...ah...you look completely different now.”

“Yer sayin’ I look like a wet cat, ain’t ya...”

Just like how drenched animals were the epitome of all things pitiable, drenched fallen beasts looked just as deserving of compassion. As she rubbed my fur with a dry cloth, Zero began looking around at our surroundings.

“Hey, what’re ya—“

“Keep this a secret.”

Laughing, Zero waved her finger lightly. In an instant, it had dried. My fur, that is.

I reacted without thinking—definitely without thinking.

“That’s insane! Hey, what’d ya do and how’d ya do it?! It usually takes me half a day ta dry this stuff! It’s so soft and fluffy! I could be a rug at the imperial castle!”

I raved out loud. Was calling myself a quilt at the royal castle a bit too masochistic? Even if it was, it was probably the greatest praise one could give to a pelt.

“Wait...are ya stupid? Whaddaya think yer doin’, doin’ that out in the open like this?”

I came to my senses. Zero looked at me with annoyed look on her face.

“You do know that, if you do not decide between berating and praising me, then the effects of both actions are halved...? I made sure that we had no spectators. We are fine.”

“If that’s true...well, then I guess there’s no problem.”

“By the way, mercenary.”

“Hm?”

“Is it alright for you to leave your lower body bare? You made a big deal over my doing so in the thrift store, but you seem quite open about it yourself.”

Zero’s gaze fell on my lower abdomen.

I yelped and hurriedly stuck a foot into my pants as my cheeks flushed from Zero’s loud laughter.

At that moment, an unpleasant aura flooded the yard.

From around the corner of the building came four figures, three female and one male. What stood out was the man’s face; he had the face of a dog. The hairs on my back stood on end as a nasty smell wafted over; sure enough, it was another of my kind—a fallen beast.

“Oh. Oh? Eeeh? What, ‘re ya like me?”

I ain’t yer kin. Don’t lump me in with yerself, ya dumb mutt.

“We’re leavin’.”

I hurried Zero as I gathered up the various tubs and buckets in my arms, and we began walking out of there.

Inherently, fallen beasts didn’t get along with other fallen beasts. We couldn’t stand each other’s bestial stench, and even if that weren’t the case, there was a strange revulsion we felt toward one other. It was like expecting a wild cat to be docile after stuffing it into a cage.

“Hey, hey, are ya ignorin’ me? You must be lonely. You’ve just met a fellow monster, and yet yer still ignorin’ him.”

“Sorry, but I don’t have the pack instincts of a dog.”

“I’m a wolf! Stop fuckin’ around!”

I didn’t really see a difference between the two, but of course a lupine fallen beast would react this way when treated like a dog.

“Either way, us fallen beasts should each keep our stink to ourselves,” I put it bluntly.

The dog-faced wolf snorted, bored.

“Well, you ain’t wrong about that...that’s why today I’m thinkin’ of havin’ my ladyfriends wash me real thoroughly. Look at ‘em, look at my ladyfriends. Look...ain’t they pretty?”

I attempted to leave, only to have him put an arm around my shoulders while pointing out his three female companions, who were frozen in fear. It was a pain, but it was tacitly understood that even though we didn’t get along, us fallen beasts would not oppose one another.

I obediently looked at the women that dog-face seemed so proud of.

Truly, they were pretty. They were all young adults, and, perhaps according to dog-face’s tastes, all possessed gleaming blond hair. Did he have some kind of harem? They didn’t seem like harlots —

It suddenly hit me, and my breathing halted momentarily.

“—Did you hunt them down?”

*Hihihihiii...* From dog-face’s mouth came an ear-splitting noise.

“Yeh. I hunted ‘em down. Those’re witches, ya know. I thought about takin’ em to the imperial capital ta get ‘em judged, but...judgements ‘re harsh. Don’t ya feel bad for ‘em? They’re so cute. That’s why I’m hidin’ ‘em.”

Gradually, all of the hair on my body began to stand on end.

He had probably just gone to some village, made up some story about a witch amongst them to use as a pretext, and had them bring out their young women. Had he’d told them that he’d crush their village if they didn’t hand over the witches, there was nothing a farming village could have done to resist.

Fallen beasts are monsters, and monsters always prey on the weak.

“—Mercenary.”

Zero spoke up. *Shit*, I thought, and tried to shield Zero, but she was out of position. The moment he had realized he was hearing a female voice, dog-face had reached for her hood and torn it off.

“This one...”

“What the hell ‘re ya doin’?! Don’t ya touch her!”

I ripped Zero free, pulled her hood back over her head, and hid her behind me.

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, what was that, where’d ya get her from? How’d ya get her? Did ya hunt her down? Did ya buy her? I ain’t ever seen someone that pretty. I want one too!”

Dog-face eagerly smelled Zero’s scent, and raised his eyes as if he’d realized something.

“—Don’t tell me, you—“

Did he realize Zero was a witch? I made a discontented noise in my head, and began walking while keeping Zero hidden. It would be a bad idea to stay here longer than we already had.

“She’s my employer. Don’t ya touch her like ya know each other. We’re leavin’.”

“Mercenary, those women are not witches.”

Zero’s voice was strangely loud. Zero pointed at the three frightened women and looked at me with a puzzled expression.

*Do you understand? I can tell with but a glance that those women are not witches*, she seemed to be saying. And—damn straight, I understood. Those women were not witches.

“Alright, let’s go.”

“But, mercenary.”

“I said let’s go—!”

“I am displeased!”

I flinched.

Those eyes and that voice. They were cold and hard, completely unlike the Zero who had been laughing but minutes earlier.

“...Me too.”

Warmth flooded back into Zero’s eyes as I muttered back to her. She may be displeased, but it’d be bad if we didn’t leave. To cause a ruckus here would mean trouble. If we testified that those women weren’t witches, the people from their village would confirm that they were. In that situation, suspicion would be cast on us.

“Woah, woah, woah, woah...that’s a false accusation yer makin’ there. Ain’t that right, ladies? You know sorcery dontcha? Ya know, the real reason I haven’t killed ‘em is ‘cause they used their sorcery on me, eh? ‘Cause if that weren’t true, then I’d ‘ve had my way with these cute girls ‘n sold ‘em!”

“Mercenary.”

“Huh?”

“—Keep this a secret.”

Smiling, Zero waved her finger once. In but a moment, they’d fallen out. All of Dog-face’s fur had instantaneously fallen out. A drenched fallen beast may look pathetic, but that didn’t hold a candle to how pathetic a furless fallen beast looked.

Somehow I managed to stop myself from bursting into laughter, grabbed Zero, and fled the scene.

A moment later, dog-face’s despairing yell set the air a-tremble. At that, my self-control finally broke, and I burst into boisterous laughter. Zero, with one arm around my neck, was cracking up too, hugging her stomach.

I wouldn’t be laughing had our positions been reversed, but as long as I wasn’t the victim, there wasn’t anything funnier than this.

That night, dog-face shut himself in his room and refused to come out, as expected. Moreover, the next morning, there was a fuss about the three cute women he had been so boastful about abruptly vanishing, but I must insist that I was not involved.

Well, I guess I had gone for something of a nighttime walk, and I did think I recalled something about prizing open a door in my half-asleep state—but that was probably just a dream.

More importantly, there was a personally concerning situation happening.

When I awoke in the morning, Zero, who was supposed to be in the single room by herself, was sleeping in my arms, with a deserved expression on her face.

Of course my roommate Albus noticed this situation, and for some reason began attacking me. I had a torrent of abuse thrown my way as Albus called me a “brute”, and “Mr. Depraved”. He’d then hurled a well-aimed chair straight at my head, which had been throbbing since early morning. This kid misunderstood a lot of things for someone his age, yet was somehow still very attentive to detail.

“I told ya it was a misunderstanding. Anyway, why’d ya get so angry in the first place?”

“Shut up! Your head is mine! It sucks for the owner of the head I seek as a sacrifice to act so unseemly, you understand?!”

No, I don’t understand. It was you who started hunting me in the first place.

“Look here, youngster. I have already spoken on this. Stop trying for his head.”

Ah, a pretty woman and a handsome youth are arguing over me...it’s dreadful, I ain’t happy about it at all.

“It’s fine, isn’t it—? Just the head is fine!”

*I ain't gonna give it to ya, I spat in my mind.*

Ah—I just wanna find the Book of Zero quick and be free of witches 'n sorcerers for good.

As I casually kept an ear on Zero and Albus' ceaseless bickering over my head, we departed for the academy, leaving Foamicaum behind us.

## **Chapter 4 – Thirteenth**



П О Ч Е Р К М а г и и К О Т О Р Ы Е Н а з ы в а ю т с я В ы с ш и м и М а г и я м и

四章 十三番

## Part 1

Settlements, whether entire countries or small towns, generally had a common feature: a core around which the establishment grew. To present an example, the vassals to the king resided in homes neighboring the imperial capital, and the servants of these vassals lived in residences neighboring their masters'. Likewise, stores lined the streets of dense, residential areas, and near these stores were situated merchants' homes and workshops.

Along similar lines, one could always find numerous smaller towns dotted around the outskirts of larger towns. Major cities were garrisoned with cavalry brigades for the purpose of maintaining law and order, namely by protecting their inhabitants from dangers, the first and foremost of which were bandits. Towns fortified by city walls, like Foamicaum, had little reason to fear attack. Villages and other meager settlements, however, had no such defenses. That's why they sought the peace of mind found in having a neighboring power who would protect them.

Our destination, too, belonged in the "defenseless village" category. According to Albus, the schoolhouse was in its vicinity.

"It's a little village called 'La Tête'."

The sandstone-paved path continued straight on toward the capital, Prasta. On the way were many branching pathways which, as I learned after checking my map, led to tiny villages and towns. Just as Albus had affirmed, this one stretched all the way to La Tête.

"It's a bit small, but the place sure feels alive! There's a bakery in La Tête that makes the best walnut bread around! The walnut's crunchy, the bread's real sweet, and when it's fresh out of the oven, it's fluffy and warm like you wouldn't believe!"

"I see...that is very intriguing," Zero muttered keenly. If half her brain was occupied by matters of sorcery and magic, then the other half had to be filled with thoughts of food. Actually, now that I thought about it, the fraction of her mind reserved for food was probably higher than that.

"Foamicaum was fun 'cause of how busy it was, but personally, I like La Tête better. Even if witch hunts were outlawed, I think that I'd still want to stay here. Maybe start a fortune teller's or something."

"Listen 'ere, boy. Seems ta me like you've forgotten, so I'll say it again. We're tryin' ta get to the academy. I get that ya like this town, but we ain't gonna stay 'ere for fun."

Albus angrily whirled on me after hearing my reminder.

"You think I would forget that?! I know we're going to the academy, and the academy's in La Tête!"

"Ain't the academy a hideout fer witches? 'S that mean La Tête's a witches' village?"

"No, it isn't," Albus sighed, exasperated. "The school's entrance is hidden in La Tête. It's behind a pillar in the church, where nobody but witches can see, and protected by an impenetrable barrier."

"So you're sayin' that in the town...that in the church, there's an entrance to a witches' lair?"

"Yep. Putting entryways in towns was always a pretty common practice. I've heard about ones at the ends of alleyways, behind statues, even under beds in inns."

"U...under beds..."

*I shouldn't overthink it.* Getting scared out of my wits by alleys, statues, and the area beneath beds would be too inconvenient.

"We'll draw attention during the day, so we'll have to kill some time once we get to La Tête, at least until it's night. There's an inn in town, so it'd probably be a good idea to grab a room. They do keep a dog, but he likes me. He jumps on me whenever I come over to play with him, and the missus of the place gives me candy sometimes."

"She gives candy to a sorcerer...?"

"It's 'cause no one knows I'm a sorcerer," Albus said nonchalantly, shrugging.

*Aren't ya scammin' 'em?* I thought but didn't say out loud.

"Everyone treats me normally 'cause they don't know I'm a sorcerer. My mother used to be a witch too, but she gave up sorcery to marry a normal human. We were living in a humans' town, after all.

A witch that gave up sorcery to live as a normal human. I was, frankly, surprised that such a thing could even happen. What with that and Solena's kindness, I guess I had been overly prejudiced against witches.

"...So, how're your parents doin' now? With yer mother bein' a former witch, life's probably tough."

"My parents, both of them, have been dead and buried for a long time... All because of a witch hunt."

Albus' voice became subdued. Just like that, shivers ran down my spine.

"It happened when I was just a kid. The townspeople discovered that my mother was a witch, and started a witch hunt in response. We'd been a happy family until then. —Ever since ancient times, the people of Wenias have relied on witches for help in their times of need. But despite that, the humans wouldn't allow witches to even get close to their towns, much less to let the witches depend on them for aid in return. My father tried to buy my mother and I time to get away, and died fighting the townspeople. My mother brought me to my grandmother's hideaway and

escaped, but ultimately, she died too. That's how I ended up being raised by my grandmother. I remember almost nothing about my parents. And just to clarify, this all took place before the witches' rebellion. That was the reality of that era's so-called coexistence."

"...So...you must hate 'em, right? Humans that is."

*How could you not?* I thought. But Albus's expression was complicated. He shook his head.

"That's not true. Look, my father really loved my mother. He wasn't even bothered by her being a witch. If I were to see all humans as disgusting, I'd be wronging my father. It's not humans who are bad, but the fact that witches are branded as evil. We're living in a world that blames witches for every misfortunate thing that happens. I might be fighting against humanity, but it's not like I feel so disgusted that I'd want to kill each and every one of them."

—It was as if Albus had become a full-fledged adult. My eyes sparkled as Zero laughed softly.

"If one cannot reason, one cannot perform sorcery. Although you seek what is beyond you, youngster, you are a fine sorcerer."

And for a while afterward we made small talk, walking along the twisting and turning lane.

## Part 2

Albus seemed his usual self as he strode along, swinging his arms, chatting about this and that in a lofty and loud voice.

Looking over the map, I saw that La Tête wasn't at all far from Foamicaum. It would take at most two hours for a horse-drawn cart to traverse the distance while going at a slow pace, and around double that for a person on foot. Since that was the case, it wouldn't have been weird to see more traffic on this route, but I hadn't encountered anyone else on our way here.

"Sure is quiet...feels like there ain't a person around."

That wasn't the feeling one should get in the vicinity of a town where people lived. Being near a town was usually reassuring; the vibe I was getting now was more disconcerting than anything. I had a bad feeling about this. The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and I began to feel uneasy; the closer we got to La Tête, the stronger that feeling became. My feet began to feel heavier and heavier with each passing step, as if my instincts were screaming at me to keep away.

Zero tugged on my clothes.

"—Do you sense it?"

She was sudden with her words. I grouchyly scratched my cheek and looked around nervously.

It couldn't just be a figment of my imagination if even Zero was taking notice of it.

"I can sense a watchful presence."

It didn't feel like we were being watched, but I was vaguely aware of a watchful presence here. It was that kind of sensation. It felt as if there were a threat in the inky darkness of the forest, yet neither of us were visible to the other. Either way, *something* was there.

This oppressive atmosphere pressed in on us from all sides.

"Youngling. Has this place always felt like this? It seems to be quite gloomy for what is supposedly a small yet lively town."

Albus stopped in his tracks. He seemed baffled when he turned to face us.

"Um," Albus mumbled.

It looked like he had been talking so noisily in order to hide his own unease.

"Past this hill is the town...but there's usually a lot more people here, and it's usually a lot busier too..."

Albus' jaw clenched shut.

"I'm gonna go take a look!" He ran off. I knew something had to be wrong. The most suspicious thing about this place was the deathly stillness this close to a human settlement.

"What're we gonna do, Ms. Witch? Is this a trap?"

"For whom? Me? Or, perhaps, for you?"

"You, ain't it?" I answered after a short pause.

"Do you think that Albus informed his comrades of my search, and is now leading us into a trap in order to defeat me?"

"I don't think so, but it sure is the first thing that comes ta mind. After all, he's the one that's led us into this situation."

"I see, you used the process of deduction to arrive at that conclusion. However, your intuition is much more effectual at revealing the truth than either your powers of deduction or common sense. What is your intuition telling you?"

"To get outta here right this instant."

"And to leave the young one behind?"

I was caught off guard when she asked that, because my instincts weren't telling me anything of the sort. After all, if Albus had purposefully led us into a trap, then ditching him would of course

be the correct course of action. But instead, my intuition was telling me to escape with him. Seeing my grimace, Zero's eyes softened.

"Well then, let us make our exit. With Albus."

"You sure it's okay ta leave without gettin' yer book back?"

"It would be wiser to seek out Thirteenth first, if there seems to be danger ahead."

"Alright, I gotcha. Oi, ki—"

"No!"

Completely overriding my call, Albus' shrill yell sounded from some distance away.

For a moment startled into inaction, Zero and I ran up the hill together, where our field of view was vastly expanded.

"What's wrong, kid? Did somethin'—"

Seeing the answer spread out below me, I couldn't even form the word "happen".

At the foot of the hill which we had just ascended, there was a small town. That was probably La Tête. Standout structures included the basilica in the middle of town and the town square itself, followed by a disorderly crowd of shops and homes of various shapes and colors, all bunched together. To traverse this town from one end to another would take no more than thirty minutes. I estimated the population of the town to be, at most, two thousand people. Compared to Prasta, which boasted a populace over fifty thousand strong, this place was no more significant than a backyard garden.

The cluster of buildings thinned as one moved outward from the center of town, until all that was left was sprawling pasture. And in these open plains—there was nary an animal set out to pasture.

It was clear that they had been attacked, and that the town known as La Tête was no more.

"No...no, it can't be! It can't be! It can't be! It can't be!"

"Oi, kid, wait for us! It ain't safe!"

Even he himself most likely didn't know why he was yelling what he was. As if stricken with panic, Albus bolted down the hill without a moment's hesitation.

If the place'd been raided by marauders, some of them might still be there. Even assuming there weren't any remaining adversaries, there'd definitely be filthy scavengers around scrounging for carrion. Either way, there'd be dead bodies. Albus might be a sorcerer, but be that as it may, he was still a kid. The town in its current state was no place for a kid.

“—For heck’s sake! What a brat!”

Exasperated, I gathered Zero into my arms and bounded down the incline. The eerie and uneasy atmosphere only intensified as we worked our way down the hill, and I broke into a cold sweat.

“Do not worry, mercenary. Do you remember what I told you?”

*Tap tap*, Zero knocked on my head.

“I shall protect you.”

I gave Zero a glance, tutting silently at her self-assured smile.

*A few short words from a witch ain’t gonna make me feel relieved.* Anyway, I could hardly be called a mercenary if I lowered my guard.

As I chased Albus into town, I saw that the devastation was far, far worse when viewed up close. Enough to make me grimace. I saw a demolished wall, a fallen sign—and all around I saw bodies, bodies, and more bodies. In the middle of all the blood and the dead stood Albus, dumbstruck, blank golden pupils fixated on the bodies strewn left and right.

“...Hey, don’t just keep starin’,” I said.

Albus started.

“Ah...”

“They probably got attacked by bandits. It’s rare for ‘em to be so messy...but I guess these people just got real unlucky.”

“Bandits,” Albus whispered, his eyes darting around in their sockets. His lips curled in derision.

“Do you see it?”

“See what?” I asked, looking at the dead body Albus was staring at. I didn’t see anything but a burnt corpse; most likely burnt alive. Although its features had been disfigured to the extent that I could no longer determine its gender, it was clear that the victim’s final moments had been a violent attempt to put itself out.

But something was off. The structures looked too clean for a town filled with blackened bodies.

Obviously, fire itself couldn’t just pick and choose who or what to burn; that’s why if even one uncontrolled fire started, the rest of the town would go down soon after. Yet after seeing the corpses, it seemed that this fire had burnt only humans and nothing else. You could always count on humans to run around and panic when set aflame, spreading the blaze, but there wasn’t a single charred home to be seen.

“Is this...magic?” I muttered. Zero nodded.

“I believe Flagis was the spell invoked. It is a spell that conjures fire which harms only your victim. As such, if summoned in a forest or hamlet, the conflagration would not spread. It seems quite clear to me that they were assailed by a witch.”

*A nearby town was attacked.* I remembered hearing that at the gates of Foamicaum. Had the gatekeeper meant this one?

## Part 3

I'd always known that witches were attacking villages to get back at the people of the kingdom. But seeing the devastation firsthand for the first time, I was shocked by the extent of the destruction.

The dead were littered about, and every home bore marks of pillaging. It was a scene of such ruination that the only possible explanation was that they had been attacked by magic-wielding vagabonds.

“The hell...? Ain't this town protected by witches from the Coven of Zero 'cause the entrance is here? What's the—“

“We aren't the only coven that uses magic,” Albus said, subdued. My eyes grew into saucers.

It hadn't occurred to me that the Coven of Zero wasn't the only coven out there. I had assumed they were the ones to plan out the revolution against the kingdom of Wenias, and the ones ravaging its lands.

But after listening to and observing the human named Albus, I was convinced that the Coven of Zero fought solely to protect witches. Still, from the things I'd heard during my tenure as a mercenary and from the devastation I saw here in La Tête, I knew that there were, without a doubt, magic-using witches who massacred people and sacked towns with relish.

“You sayin' that there're other groups like the Coven of Zero?”

“No! Don't get 'em confused with us! Those guys are just thieves... they're here to steal the Book of Zero! They attacked the town to make a move on the academy in all the chaos!”

“Those guys are just thieves, ya say...but the Book of Zero's with the Coven of Zero right? No matter what they do, that bunch—hey! Oi, wait!”

Before I could finish speaking, Albus dashed off again, probably to make sure the academy was all right. I hesitated, then turned toward Zero, who had silently leapt to her feet.

“Hey—“

*What do ya wanna do? What should we do? What's goin' on?*

I was bursting at the seams with questions, but not a single word came out of my mouth. That was because Zero's expression was icy, and she herself seemed as immobile as a puppet.

"...Hello?"

"So it is also possible...to use it for this purpose..."

The dilapidated home, the fallen sign, the roasted corpses. Her eyes darted from one object to the next as she mumbled sentence fragments.

Finally, she made as if to follow Albus, and slowly walked away.

Albus ended up running into a very old church.

I made my way through its gates, and entered the run-down chapel. Taking a look around, I saw that the normally neat seats were strewn around in a disorderly fashion, and glass from the windows was scattered across the floor. God's house was in a truly bad state. Even here, there were bodies. I gleaned from a cursory look that there were six.

These remains, however, were different from those I had seen outside. Those were the bodies of people who had run for their lives and been slaughtered. These, though, were unmistakably the remains of combatants.

Around the necks of two of the bodies were chokers inlaid with brilliant vermillion gemstones, Exactly like the one Albus had. That being the case, those two were probably part of the Coven of Zero.

Did that mean the remaining four bodies were the assailants?

"Are these from the Coven of Zero...and those from the attackers?"

Albus nodded.

"Everyone in the Coven of Zero fought to protect the academy and the town..."

But they'd failed to save the townspeople. At least they'd fought to the last here, defending the academy.

"Did they finish each other off?"

"No, that is incorrect."

Zero then stepped forward abruptly, and headed right past Albus onward to the witches' corpses.

"Hey," I warned her, but Zero paid no heed and peered at the six bodies.

“The four invading witches first slew the two witches affiliated with the Coven of Zero. After the deed was done, another witch appeared and slew the invaders as well.”

“How do you know that?”

“The natures of their deaths are dissimilar. The witches from the Coven of Zero show signs of having put up a fight, yet the four remaining witches appear to have died without time to react. Above all, it is the fact that all six have had their magic completely stripped from them that makes the involvement of a third party undeniable.”

So apparently, a witch, belonging neither to the Coven of Zero nor to the attackers, had made an appearance here. This was just getting more and more perplexing.

As I racked my brains over it, Albus took a deep breath...

And spoke in a voice trembling with fear and fury.

“Thirteenth!”

I could swear that Zero and I were both thinking of the same question right then.

*How the hell d’ya know that name, and why’re ya using it now?* But before I could voice my concern, everything changed.

The eye opened.

I instantly felt goosebumps spring up all over my body. The steadily increasing unease I’d felt while approaching the town was gone, but in its place was an intense, intimidating air, bordering on terror, fixated right on us.

*Somewhere, the eye. Somewhere—*

I looked up, and instantly regretted it. There was a single, titanic eye clinging to the ceiling of the church.

## Part 4

The newly-opened fissure ran from one end of the ceiling to the other.

The bulging eyeball’s gaze darted from me to Albus before coming to rest on Zero.

“That is quite the obvious surveillance mechanism. Mercenary!”

“Eh? Uh...oh!”

“This is a forced summoning! We will be launched away from here, so hold on to the youngster and take my arm!”

*What’s going on? What’s she saying?* Of course I couldn’t understand. But I hefted Albus onto a shoulder and seized Zero’s wrist, pulling her into my arms.

In a flash, the floor disappeared. Actually, no. This was—

The floor, the walls, and the room itself had all vanished. We’d been ejected into a gaping void. I couldn’t help but scream.

—I was falling.

*At this rate, I’m gonna die—*

“Calm down, mercenary. You will be alright as long as you do not let go of my hand.”

Zero’s sleepy voice brought me back to my senses.

“Slow your breathing. Plant your feet, and feel the ground beneath you. Your body has already arrived. Bring your consciousness back into your physique. Focus on my hand.”

As I took a deep breath, I realized that I hadn’t been breathing. I felt the sensation of being in freefall fade away, and that I was indeed standing on something solid.

*What was that just now? A hallucination?* I felt extremely cold, and was trembling all over. Looking around, I saw that we were in a dark chamber, lit by four flickering candles. The pungent aroma of incense permeated the air. The floor beneath my feet was paved with flagstones. And in my arms was Zero. On that note, I remembered that Albus was still on my shoulder.

“Thank goodness! Mercenary’s back, Zero!” Albus was clinging to my head.

—*I’m back?*

I took a look at my surroundings. I didn’t see any reason to say I was “back”—

“Hey...where the hell ’s this? Hold on a sec. We were in the church just a second ago...”

“That was a forced summoning—it is the power to ignore your target’s wishes and forcibly transport them to another location. It seems that such a trap was laid at the chapel. It is a feat of sorcery repurposing the method of summoning a demon for use on humans, and I know of only two people who were capable of it. One of them was my mentor.”

At that moment, I suddenly detected an unknown person’s scent mixed in with the overpowering incense.

They were a shadow in the darkness. Though I was alert to their existence, a slip of my concentration could cause me to lose track of them. They were that well-melded with the murky dark.

I couldn't see them, but I knew that they were there.

"And the other was Thirteenth—you."

Zero pulled her lips back into a smile.

*Thirteenth*, I mulled over the name in my head, befuddled, and nearly cricked my neck with the speed with which I looked up.

*Squelch.*

A figure of a man emerged from the gloom. Based off what I'd seen of Albus and Zero, I'd assumed that witches and sorcerers all had great looks. After seeing Thirteenth, that didn't seem to be the case at all.

He was tall enough to be a warrior, and endowed with solidly built shoulders. But thanks to a hunched back, he looked for the large part to be undeniably gloomy. His bangs were also unusually long, which served to curtain his eyes.

He was a large, sullen-looking man. Without a doubt, this was Thirteenth. I knew it was a bit weird coming from me, a fallen beast, but even with my inhuman face, I was still handsomer than he.

Looking directly at the man, Zero narrowed her eyes in challenge.

"Will you deign to explain yourself, Thirteenth? Why did you summon me?"

"I summoned, and you came as a result. That was the result, not my original intention."

"Then are you summoning every human that was there? That is quite troublesome. You have changed little, Thirteenth."

"It is because I heard my name being invoked, Zero."

From a break in the man's bangs came an adhesive-like gaze, which adhered itself to Albus. *Gulp*, Albus let out a small whimper and clung tighter to my head.

"In the chapel was the entrance to a dangerous coven's hideaway. After an attack by other witches, they seemed to evacuate, but I played by the book and stationed a surveillance eye there for a few days. That was when my name was called. Thus to see what it was about, I decided to summon whatever it was here."

"What if the one being summoned had no knowledge of sorcery? Had my mercenary been imprudent, he would have died."

Ah, so I had been close to death. It was clear to me now that Albus meant that I had escaped the clutches of death when he said that I was “back”. I disliked this Thirteenth fellow already.

“That one with no knowledge of sorcery would enter a town with that many corpses strewn around, go toward the entrance to a witches’ coven, and call out my name was beyond my expectations. Besides, I had lit incense in advance. If it was needed, I had sound available as well. Even if the soul had gone to the other side, there would no trouble in calling it back. Now it is my turn to ask the questions. Why did you leave the cavern, Zero?” Thirteenth inquired in an accusatory tone.

*Humph*, Zero snorted.

“I had become just a bit bored on my own. I thought to take a stroll and to see your dreary face while I was at it.”

“This is slightly far for a stroll...I told you it is dangerous outside. You promised to wait.”

“Yes, my journey has been fraught with peril. No fewer than ten times have I been called a witch and chased around. Still, I learned. That is, danger is not unavoidable. That being the case, I may have wasted away centuries. Perhaps it would have been better if I had departed earlier for the outside. Do you not agree, Thirteenth?”

The base of my tongue went numb and ached from the strange tension in the air.

## Part 5

What was going on here? Weren’t Thirteenth and Zero comrades? She’d talked about him so endearingly, but now that they were face to face, she seemed murderous.

Suddenly—

“What’s going on?”

Albus’s voice grew soft.

“Zero...why...you’re the one that wrote the Book of Zero...so why...why...” Albus was shaking. “Why do you know Thirteenth, the king’s sorcerer?!”

*The king’s...sorcerer?*

Confused, I looked to Albus for an answer.

“Hey, whaddya mean by ‘king’s sorcerer’? Are ya sayin’ that the king of a country fightin’ against witches is actually employin’ one himself?”

“Exactly...Thirteenth helps hunt down witches. That guy’s a traitor! He kills witches, even though he himself is a sorcerer!”

I’d wondered how the hell a country that wasn’t allied with the Church could hold out in a conflict with witches—apparently they had sorcerers of their own as allies.

One thing that witches were highly skilled in was concealing themselves. When hidden, they were impossible to differentiate from normal human beings; even the Church, which warred endlessly against witches, found distinguishing them to be extraordinarily difficult. And so, people disturbed by this began to kill other perfectly normal humans under the pretext that they were witches, in order to reassure themselves. Between the number of human deaths caused by witches and those caused by humans acting out of fear and paranoia, it would seem that the latter was historically higher.

How could one solve this aforementioned problem? Simply by enlisting the aid of witches.

Zero had said that “magic leaves a trail,” and considering that she tracked Thirteenth from the Forest of the Bowed Moon all the way to Wenias, this claim possessed a fair degree of accuracy.

Of course, the problem was that there normally weren’t any witches willing to help out with witch hunts—though it seemed that there was one right here—though he was not technically a witch, but a sorcerer.

“But what the heck does a sorcerer have ta do ta get accepted by a country that’s at war with witches?”

“Thirteenth did it by killing a massive group of witches in front of the king himself,” Albus spat.

“Once, the Coven of Zero attacked the king. It was while he was out traveling, outside of town. The war’d just started then, and we were running low on sacrifices, so we tried to get the king to ban witch hunts. Unfortunately, this was right after the Revels of Revenge. We weren’t able to see eye to eye and got attacked by soldiers. We fought back, ‘cause we didn’t have any other choice...”

*Pinch*, Albus bit his lip.

“And then Thirteenth showed up and massacred all of the Coven of Zero members there. Just like that, Thirteenth earned the king’s trust and joined the kingdom as a sorcerer who protects its lands.”

It was a dubious story that both enlightened and sounded absolutely ridiculous. But since the people of Wenias had depended on witches for help in their times of need, it wasn’t impossible that they were relying on sorcerers to hunt down witches, no matter how strange this strategy was. The answer to their prayers for a suitable replacement for the Church’s aid had gallantly made its appearance onstage in their most perilous hour.

Thirteenth, who had been watching the exchange between Albus and I, seemed to lose his patience and slammed the butt of his staff into the floor. Albus flinched and looked at Thirteenth.

“Do not—speak Zero’s name lightly. It is very displeasing.”

*Fwoop*, all the fur on my body stood on end.

I got the same feeling I did back when I was being watched at the Church. The cool gaze Zero spasmodically exhibited was frightening, but the terror Thirteenth’s gaze provoked in me was on a completely different level from the fear I’d felt from Zero’s.

Zero harbored no malice whatsoever. She hadn’t ever seemed intent on doing anything, so I wasn’t scared of her. Thirteenth’s eyes, however, were clearly filled with malevolence. He burned with murderous intent, and he seemed as if he was about to rush me.

His look told me that I wouldn’t be able to match his power. The fear I that felt from being stared down by an opponent like this—

I knew it was pretty pitiful for a big guy like me to be scared silly, but I was far past the point of being able to put up a confident facade. Albus seemed to be just as scared as I was; he was shaking all over. If I took this guy off my shoulder and set him down, his legs’d just give way and he’d collapse onto the floor.

So I didn’t do it.

“The Coven of Zero...? You employ Zero’s name without the proper respect and defile it! This is an unforgivable crime. The fact that you people are suffixing your name with that of a witch of the murky black, who devours knowledge in a cave—it sickens me!”

Quickly, Thirteenth slashed at the air with a finger. In that moment I saw a cobalt light cut through the air and made to shield Zero and Albus with my body, back facing Thirteenth. I had no idea what kind of magic it was, only that it was meant to harm Albus.

However, no howl of agony came from between my gritted teeth.

Nothing happened. I hadn’t protected them from danger in a heroic fashion—in fact, my actions were quite unseemly.

Embarrassed, I opened my eyes. That was when I gradually realized that Zero was poking out from behind my shoulder, and was facing Thirteenth.

“You...why—“

“I did say that this is my mercenary, Thirteenth. If you deal him even a single wound, I shall mince you into an offering for a demon.”

Zero's hands were giving off coal-black smoke. She irritatedly shook it off and clapped her hands together, making a loud sound, to remove the soot that clung to her palms. I had felt like I'd saved them, but it seemed that I was actually the one who had been saved.



## Part 6

I felt dejected. But a mere moment later, the tension in the atmosphere was again ratcheted up a notch.

“Do you believe you can, Zero? Our powers are not as they were during our rivalry ten years past.”

Thirteenth was fanning Zero’s flame. The color drained from Zero’s countenance, and a cold smile carved itself onto her lips.

“Then shall we test that claim, Thirteenth? I am just a hair displeased.”

I immediately took Albus under my arm and began distancing ourselves from Zero. As if Zero had been waiting for exactly that, her body erupted in ruby flame. This wasn’t a joke. No matter how many lives one had, it wouldn’t be enough to survive a battle between a sorcerer and a mage!

“H-h-hey kid! Can’t ya do anythin’ about this?! It’s really gettin’ outta hand!”

“I can’t do anything! The highest level magic I can use is Flagis! Against a witch who can summon an inferno at will and a sorcerer who has lightning at his beck and call, just a single touch from either’ll turn you to charcoal! If I had the time, I might be able to do something about it with sorcery, but...”

“We don’t got the time fer ya ta use sorcery! Yer so useless!”

“And you aren’t?! You can’t do anythin’ either!”

“Wha—ah fuck it, I’ll just try whatever comes ta mind!”

Desperate and with nothing to lose, I roared with all my might.

“Hey witch!”

At this point, I had only one thing to say that could possibly get Zero’s attention. It was completely stupid, but—

“It’s just about time for lunch! Settle this after ya eat!”

Zero stopped what she was doing after hearing my imbecilic message. The fire that had wreathed her body dissipated in a flash, and her head swiveled toward me.

“Lunchtime?”

“Yeah.”

“Food?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that so?” Zero muttered, turning to face Thirteenth.

“We cannot fight on empty stomachs, and it would be unseemly to strike when we are not both at peak condition. We can fight at any time, but that is not so for having a meal. So—Thirteenth!”

“We have some quality cuts of lamb. I shall have a cook roast them for us,” Thirteenth nodded solemnly, as if to express complete agreement. He was no longer in battle stance either. Albus and I exchanged a look and clasped each other’s hands.

“I desire tuber soup.”

“Then I shall have them ready it.”

Zero and Thirteenth—who had just moments before been staring each other down, each radiating magical power so potent as to be visible—had agreed to a truce without a moment’s pause in between.

We had been transported from the church in La Tête to, of all places, the capital of Wenias: Prasta; specifically, a dungeon which had been repurposed for use as personal quarters. I really couldn’t believe it, but I couldn’t find any evidence to support my doubt. Zero’d said that “Thirteenth is in Prasta,” and Albus’d said that “Thirteenth is the king’s sorcerer,” so it was probably the truth. We were really in Prasta.

That meant that we’d moved instantaneously from La Tête to Prasta—well, it sure made travel real convenient. The risk of death was a whole ‘nother story though.

After ascending the staircase which led up and out of the underground chamber, I saw a robed figure, appearing to be one of Thirteenth’s underlings, shuffling toward us. He received instructions from Thirteenth, seemingly about preparing our meal, and shuffled off without a word.

Albus looked like he wanted to shout, but he also seemed to understand that making noise would only worsen the situation. He somehow managed to control himself and sat down at the table set out for our meal. As expected from a sorcerer who’s both a child and a self-proclaimed pragmatist.

The four of us, including Thirteenth, seated ourselves around the dining table.

On the two ends of the rectangular table sat Zero and Thirteenth. That left Albus and I to sit opposite each other. As one would expect, the atmosphere wasn’t conducive to amiable conversation, so everyone just sat in silence.

What could we talk about in those circumstances anyway? Only the sound of Zero cheerfully downing her soup added a bit of liveliness, but it only made the silence more noticeable.

"I could die from how unappetizing this soup is."

The one to break the awkward silence was, of course, Zero, although this act of hers only made things more uncomfortable. My body went stiff, and I looked at Zero and Thirteenth.

"Even though the soup my mercenary makes is absolutely delicious...a cook's livelihood is to cook, yes? But then, why, compared to mercenary's soup..."

## Part 7

*Oi, cut it out, please stop talkin'. It's great that you're complimentin' me 'n all, but doin' it now an' in that way is just makin' this situation worse fer me. Ah, look, he's glarin' at me, ain't he? Thirteenth's glarin' at me, and he's lookin' really displeased. Or is that just how he normally looks? Either way, it's scary as hell.*

"...I had them prepare it the same way we did in the cave. It is enough that it is edible," Thirteenth finally replied. His tone was less displeased than simply apathetic, and very eerie.

"You jest! I know that you're a lover of honey."

"That is because sugar is precious. However, there is no need to add pointless flavor and fragrance to tuber soup."

"It's fine to admit to liking sweet foods. Humans have a sense of taste. To ignore the pursuit of taste and abstain from the pursuit of pleasure is to disrespect demons. Isn't that right, mercenary?"

"Well...I...I think, s' long as it's good ta eat..."

Frankly, under these circumstances, I wouldn't have agreed with her even if the food wasn't tasteless. I couldn't have cared less if Thirteenth had a sweet tooth that made him go looking for honey every single night.

Zero pursed her lips and glared at me, looking annoyed, as if it were unimaginable for me not to support her. She seemed like she wanted to say that I was supposed to support my employer, but once I got the message across that I didn't want anything to do with it by avoiding her gaze, Zero turned away unhappily and tore into her lamb.

"Really...you have lived outside for ten years but are still as thickheaded as ever, Thirteenth. That said, what are you doing ordering people around like that? Get off your high horse. But no matter how much you try to be pretentious, it will not change the hard-headedness at the core of your being."

“Times change, Zero, and I will do what is most appropriate. If I do not behave as is expected in these times, I will only be regarded as odd, which is something I would much like to avoid.”

The atmosphere felt strained. Very much so. I couldn’t help myself but ask a question.

“So...y’know...you...you two are...friends, right...?”

“We are compatriots,” Zero and Thirteenth responded in harmony. *Right, I get it now. Compatriots, eh? It’s probably like the relationships between people assigned to the same troop in an army.*

“Oh...but that means you guys ain’t enemies, yeah?”

“I did not feel that way, but this man summoned me, attempted to harm my mercenary, and quarreled with me. Of course I am incensed.”

“I did not mean to summon you, and my target was not your mercenary, but the sorcerer who sullies the name ‘Zero’. It would not be my responsibility had the mercenary been harmed for attempting to shield the sorcerer.”

“You are as adept as ever in evading responsibility are you not, Thirteenth?”

“I will receive your praise, Zero.”

Silence resumed. Trying to escape reality, I looked at Albus. This kid had tried to take my head, but now he was the only one present who didn’t strike fear into my heart. I saw that he hadn’t touched any of the food arrayed before him. It wasn’t because he wasn’t hungry; his hunger was certainly making itself known.

“...Aren’t ya gonna eat?” I asked. Albus scowled nervously at me.

“I can’t eat this...what if he poisoned my food?”

“It ain’t poisoned!”

“How you do you know?!”

“‘Cause I’m a beast.”

Albus looked blankly at me. Then, scowling at the table, he began to wolf down his food. And then —

“This is sooo unappetizing!” Albus yelled with all his might—while scowling at Thirteenth.

“Mhmm, mhmm,” Zero nodded, satisfied. For a split second I wished to be as brave and reckless as Albus, but if I were, I’d probably have died a long time ago. Wild animals don’t run because they’re cowards. They flee because their danger-sensing instincts make them.

Thirteenth's face seemed drawn from Albus and Zero's round of "unappetizing", but I wasn't sure if it was a hallucination caused by my fear. No. Looking at how he raised his arm listlessly and called over the server, I couldn't blame it on my imagination.

Before long, a small plate was placed in front of us. What seemed to be baked sweets were arranged upon it, but their surfaces glittered with sculpted candies.

Sugar was a fairly high class product. Candy made from boiled-down sugar was not eye-catching, but when that candy was sculpted, it became the food of the nobility. *Is this revenge for the complaints that meal was unappetizing?* I didn't know whether or not he was planning to bring this out after the meal anyway, but...

As if she'd never seen baked sweets before, Zero nonchalantly took one from the plate, saying "at best, it's just another tasteless food," and delivered it to her mouth. In that moment, she froze.

As it turned out, "smiling like a blooming flower" wasn't merely a figurative expression. The fact that I had the impression that she was normally expressionless and cold also added to that effect, lending Zero's smile an almost lethal intensity.

After looking at Albus and annoyedly at me, she began stuffing her cheeks with the sweets. It appeared to be an overwhelming victory for Thirteenth.

"—So," Zero heaved a contented sigh and pushed aside the plate. She seemed to be in a good mood.

"Shall we hear your story, Thirteenth? Why did you, after leaving the cave in search of the book, decide to amuse yourself in such a strange way by becoming the king's sorcerer?"

"That is because the thief employed the most effective tactic. The person who stole the book had already spread the knowledge of magic throughout this kingdom of Wenias, and riled up the fiendish organization called The Coven of Zero in order to enmesh the kingdom in panic and chaos. There were many witches who would resist my recapture of the Book of Zero, and I was but one person. So, I made a proposition to the king: I would aid the witch hunts in exchange for his assistance in finding the book. That was a year ago—even now, I have yet to recover the Book of Zero. That is my tale."

"Don't spout that bullshit! You're the fiend!!" Albus yelled. He slammed his fist into the table and stood up forcefully, sending his chair crashing to the ground.

"The Coven of Zero isn't a fiendish organization. All we do is protect witches from witch hunts. All we do is attack towns that decide to burn witches at the stake, and save witches who'll be killed! What do you even mean that your book was stolen?! The Book of Zero was written by that person —"

At that point, Albus seemed taken aback, and stopped speaking.

—The Book of Zero wasn't written by "that person".

Albus already knew that. In that case, was "that person" given the book by Zero? And if not, then did they steal it?

Albus glanced at Zero. His eyes seemed to be pleading for help, but Zero said nothing.

"We...didn't mean for the kingdom to fall into panic and chaos..."

"But the country *has* fallen into panic and chaos."

In contrast to Albus, who was drained of all vigor, Thirteenth's cool voice radiated confidence.

"You lot speak about creating peace for witches, but you kill humans for that cause? If witches win this struggle, the only thing that will remain is despairing fear toward witches. Peace cannot be achieved in that state."

"It's not like we started killing humans first—"

"But humans are dying. Do you not think of the lives of the humans killed when witches are being saved?"

"We've got no other choice, don't we?! This is war. Humans haven't stopped killing witches, so we have no choice but to kill humans in return!"

"Well then, can you say definitively that you aren't killing any humans other than those who've killed witches? That you haven't delivered false justice? Do you believe that yourselves and only yourselves are righteous? That's why this war began!"

Those were the words I spoke to Albus right then. War begins with revenge for an act of revenge. *We feel the same way, don't we, Thirteenth?* But it would be cruel to try to make a kid understand that.

## Part 8

Albus' eyes swam with tears, on the verge of overflowing. Then Thirteenth dealt the final blow. It seemed like this man knew not the concept of mercy.

"On top of all that...reports have been received from every corner of the kingdom regarding attacks and looting by witches. Of course they come from villages and towns completely unrelated to the witch hunts. Witches are killing people innocent of any and all wrongdoing, just to loot their possessions—don't tell me you didn't know."

The destruction in La Tête naturally floated to the front of my mind. Nothing Albus could say would change the fact that witches had pillaged and slaughtered. I hadn't heard the specifics back then, but—

“That's not the Coven of Zero! Those are the exiled, wayward sorcerers—“

“Wayward sorcerers?” I asked. Albus' shoulders trembled. I hadn't meant to intimidate him, but I couldn't deny that my tone had been a bit severe. Albus'd told us that there were other covens, but the words “wayward sorcerer” didn't mean that they were part of some other, independent coven. That they were wayward indicated that there was a coven they had formerly been a part of.

“I told you already that the Coven of Zero will teach anyone magic, even if they're homeless...or an orphan...right?”

“I see...so it's like that.”

I wasn't sure how those alleged other covens picked up magic, but I could understand if it was because they'd been part of the Coven of Zero but left to do as they liked.

So the dead witches in La Tête's church, both the attackers and the attacked, were basically all of the Coven of Zero. That being the case—the reason La Tête was raided and destroyed was because of the Coven of Zero. Seeming to understand this, Albus' expression became strained.

“There were some people who abused the power of magic the moment they learned it. People like that were banished from the academy to prevent them from learning new magic, but we couldn't stop them from using what they'd already learned, so...”

To be expected. By giving strength the likes of which no normal human could withstand to people like those, who'd been powerless and persecuted, it should have been plain what the results would be.

“So they became bandits 'n pillaged as much as they liked, yeah?”

Albus nodded reservedly.

It was like giving deadly explosives to a bunch of dumb kids.

Magic, through the medium known as the Book of Zero, was indiscriminate of the place and people to whom it was disseminated to. Even if the Book of Zero were reclaimed, as long as there was a written copy, it wouldn't be enough. Even if there wasn't a written copy, as long as the first page still existed, it wouldn't be enough. It was like mixing ink and water. Water made cloudy by ink wouldn't be able to become pure water again.

“The witches who attacked La Tête were wayward sorcerers too, I'm sure of it. Those banished dirtbags banded together and attacked the academy. They were probably trying to steal the Book of Zero to make themselves stronger...”

In other words, among the witches of this kingdom, there were three great forces at work.

First was the Coven of Zero, which fought to realize halcyon days for all witches.

Second were the wayward sorcerers who'd learned magic in the Coven of Zero, and were now running amok.

Third was the sorcerer who belonged to the kingdom and indiscriminately hunted and killed members of the other two parties—otherwise known as Thirteenth.

There were probably also forces in this kingdom who didn't have any interest in learning magic or waging war, but since they weren't involved in this conflict, it should be fine to just ignore them. Just the classification of witches already made my head hurt, so if the number of groups that used sorcery kept increasing like this, I'd be hopelessly lost.

"Organizations not under the jurisdiction of the government are not organizations at all. They simply obtained a fun little toy, the Book of Zero, and did whatever they liked. They must be purged of that, assembled, and governed. Order must be restored."

Thirteenth stood up silently.

"There is use for you yet. It would be a waste of talent to simply kill you. Obey me, cooperate with me completely, and I promise to grant you even more knowledge and power."

Albus was lost for words.

"That's—"

"If you refuse, then it's off to the stake with you!"

I too was speechless.

I felt like I should get up but couldn't find a reason to. I looked toward Zero, but far from stopping Thirteenth, she didn't show any interest in the subject at hand.

*Well then, I guess it falls to me.*

"Burnin' at the stake...he's still a kid ya know?" I said. *No one's so heartless as to show no mercy even to children.*

"He might be a child, but he's still a threat if he is capable of sorcery. And because he is a child, if he wields that power without prudence, he must be destroyed."

Thirteenth's riposte was smooth, but I held on.

"Maybe so, but yer still gonna kill him?"

"Then would you pardon him because he is a child?"

“Well...”

“Each and every person who works with sorcery is waylaid from the human path. And any and all who are waylaid from the human path will receive the power that is sorcery. Sorcerers are those who will fulfill your wishes in return for proper compensation. Sorcerers are those who will kill people at the requests of people. Be it man or woman, adult or child, a sorcerer is such a creature, but not a human. That’s all there is to it, Zero’s mercenary. Besides, it is strange for a bestial warrior to be advocating for a sorcerer in the first place.”

Facts, facts, and more facts. I clenched my jaw, saying nothing in response.

True, Albus did try to take my head. He basically tried to kill me. I’d been able to survive so long because I was a fallen beast, and because I encountered Zero. If I’d been just a normal person and hadn’t met Zero, I’d have been killed by Albus a long time ago. No, if I’d been a normal human, I would never have been targeted in the first place, but—

I took a sidelong glance at Albus.

I could perceive the fear and confusion in those normally-twinkling golden eyes. There, anger and hatred mingled, and they were glaring, barely, at Thirteenth. Albus’ rage was somehow propping him up. I didn’t care if he was a sorcerer or whatever else; he was still a kid.

I was at a loss for an answer to the question of whether or not I would pardon him for being a child—but would I *kill* him for being a child?

I don’t mean to make myself seem like a saint or anything, but even as a mercenary, I would hesitate to kill a kid.

“Contemplation is important. Take a night to think about it. ...Zero—”

“What, do you want a rematch? I do apologize, but I don’t feel up to it on a full stomach.”

“Return to the cave.”

“I refuse. I waited. I waited, but you did not return. This is the result. This is how I feel now.”

“Zero, I—”

“About that, Thirteenth.”

Zero spat out the fork she had been holding with her mouth, and it made a noise as it clanged against her plate.

“It is taboo for witches to hunt witches. No matter how justifiable a reason you may have, that disturbs the order of the world. When too much power is given to one person, that power will drive them mad. I suspect that you know what I am talking about, Thirteenth. The six witches at

the church—they were all empty shells. It may be to retrieve the book, Thirteenth, but you have crossed the line.”

“Once the book is retrieved, everything will be finished. So, Zero—“

“That is why, Thirteenth, I will be searching for the book with my own hands,” Zero quietly declared, interrupting Thirteenth.

“The book is my possession. My book, my crime. If I must dirty my hands to deal with it, Thirteenth, then I choose to soil my hands.”

“No, Zero!” Albus gave a sorrowful cry. “You said that you were our ally, didn’t you?! We went to the academy together, and you said that you were our ally...so—”

“I have not said a single word about being your ally.”

Albus’s eyes widened in blank amazement.

“But,” he quivered in a small voice.

“I asked you to take us to the academy because you told us that you knew where the book was. That is all.”

Albus looked at me. —As if he were pleading for help.

Unfortunately, as Zero’s mercenary, I’d become Albus’ adversary in this matter. Those were just the facts.

## Part 9

“You’re on our side, aren’t you?” Albus asked. Zero said nothing in response, but merely held a poker face. I quickly followed suit. I wasn’t going to spill the beans on information my employer didn’t want to make public.

Seeing that I hadn’t said anything either, Albus bit his lip and hung his head.

*Sorry ‘bout that, Albus. I’m not tryin’ ta say that ya fooled yerself into thinkin’ that she is. I just can’t give you a straight answer. Fuck, I feel disgusted.*

“...You weren’t lying...when you said the book...really was stolen from you...?”

Zero didn’t even nod, only narrowed her eyes in acknowledgement.

“What I said is the truth. However remarkable the witch you call ‘that person’ was, they, the founder of the Coven of Zero, thieved that tome from me. Robbed—may be the more accurate term.”

“Robbed...?” Albus turned pale.

“The thief murdered every single witch in that cave, leaving only two of us alive—Thirteenth and I. They robbed us of the Book of Zero and stole the techniques of magic to spread it far and wide.”

Albus’ face fell, and his head slumped to the table. Through my years as a mercenary, I’d seen this moment—the moment when a person’s spirit is broken—many, many times before. His soul was crushed.

“—Hey, Miss Witch. Why’d ya write that book? Were ya tryin’ ta destroy the world?”

This was something I’d been wondering for a while now. That is, why did such a fearsome book exist at all?

My past self might have thought it was obvious that it was because witches were trying to bring about apocalypse. But having met Zero, I couldn’t imagine her being interested in something so bothersome.

“...Because it would be handy to be able to start fires without flint...?” Zero repeated, with a slightly biting tone, the point she had earlier brought up so cheerfully.

“Because it would be handy to be able to hunt with an unending supply of arrows. Because it would be easier to catch dinner without needing to braid rope. Because without having to climb trees to gather fruit, because without having to get stitches for wounds—“

“Everyone would be happy, I thought.” Zero laughed softly.

Hers was the face of a child lost in reverie.

“So it is also possible to use it for this purpose,” Zero had said, after seeing the destruction witches had wreaked upon La Tête. It had been beyond imagining for her.

Zero had thought of little else but the blinding future that could be created by using these powerful techniques in a most benevolent manner.

New innovations are always born out of pure passion and humble ambitions, yet once they are born, they escape the control of the inventors and are spread like pollen across the land. Even among beneficial creations such as herbal medicines, each has variants which are lethal if overdosed and which the minds behind the medicine itself never intended to create.

“This youth expressed his desire for humans and witches to coexist. I am of the same opinion. The repetitive talks I had with the witches in the cave, who shared the same values and knowledge as I did, and only buried themselves in books as I did, were quite boring. I wanted to leave for the outside world, but the world said that we witches were evil. If only I could devise a helpful technique—one that could be used by all, not just witches—then the world would surely welcome and accept us.”

But if people could light fires ablaze without need of flint, then the stones would stop selling. If everyone had an endless supply of arrows to use, then the craftsmen who made bows and arrows would be out of jobs. There'd be a bunch of people who wouldn't be so happy, I thought vaguely.

But furthermore, there was indeed some truth to her words. If only magic were used righteously. If only magic were used not to deal wounds, but to protect and to save.

“—That line of thought was why I wrote that tome, but I should not have done so.”

“Zero.”

Thirteenth's voice rang out. Zero glanced his way and silently shook her head.

“I should have heeded your advice, Thirteenth. I should have burnt the grimoire to cinders the moment you warned me of its apocalyptic potential. It was I whose will was too weak. I—”

Zero breathed a deep breath.

“I was foolish.”

I lay idly in an empty room set aside for the serving staff. I had resigned myself to being relegated to a bed of straw in the stables, being a lowly fallen beast, so this was a luxury I had not expected.

In contrast, Albus had been temporarily relocated to a dungeon cell. He was to stay there for a night, and decide whether his fate would be the stake or subordination to Thirteenth. Normally you'd pick the latter, I suppose. He now knew that the person who founded the Coven of Zero was a chronic scumbag.

The question for me was what I would do after this. I was to be Zero's guard, and she was to return me to a human form. Of course my future actions would depend on Zero's, but those were entirely unpredictable.

Still—for some reason, it felt like my work was done here.

I was never that extraordinary as a mercenary in the first place. Zero'd hired me because I'd been in the right place at the right time, and because I had a conspicuous figure. Now that she had Thirteenth to watch her back, what good could it do her to keep a mercenary like me by her side? I would dismiss myself if I were her.

Holding my hand up toward the ceiling, I examined a minute cut on my thumb.

It was nearly healed, but the scar Zero had left after biting my finger was still there.

Back then, Zero really did need someone to serve as her guard. But I doubted that I had been anything more than just a distraction for her even then.

Zero had tossed aside Albus with lightning speed after he had served out his role as guide.

What did that mean for me?

When I am no longer necessary, what will Zero do with me?

I slowly withdrew my hand and shut my eyes in silence. When suddenly—

“Zero’s mercenary.”

“Whoaaaaah!” I yelped, falling off the bed. Surprisingly, I had heard a voice come from close by.

I was usually acutely aware of human presence, and could hear footsteps from a mile away. Because of that, I nearly died from shock when the voice suddenly sounded right beside me. It was a matter of life and death.

“...Huh?”

But unless a face was going to poke its way out from under my bed, I couldn’t see even a shadow of a threatening presence. I could swear on my life that I’d heard something, but the owner of the voice was nowhere to be found.

*Was it just my imagination? I’d heard it pretty clearly though...*

Then, a mouse scuttled up onto the bed.

*No way. No, could it be?*

“Zero’s mercenary, I would like to have a word with you. Come to the basement.”

“M-mou—“

*The mouse is talk—*

“You may follow this mouse. Come. I will be waiting.”

Having delivered its brief message, the mouse began scampering away, leaving me no time to even shriek.

## Part 10

He wants me to follow it? How does he expect me to do that?! It’s a talking mouse, for fuck’s sake. It’s way too creepy.

But as I stood there, I noticed the mouse staring at me from its place at the door, waiting. Its unnerving gaze was not to be understated. Despite being a mouse, it seemed to be commanding me to hurry up and open the door.

“Ah... ta hell with it! What’ve I got ta lose?!” I roared with undue ferocity and shoved open the door, staying one step behind the mouse.

We left the servants’ quarters and headed down a hallway until we emerged into a courtyard.

As I raised my eyes to gaze at the castle, I thought that it resembled a gigantic rectangular mass of stone.

I had no doubts that it was a near-impregnable fortress. Its ramparts were works of masonry, and the chinks in its armor were reinforced with alabaster. From the corners of the stronghold rose four soaring spires of considerable height, which would make for fine vantage points during dire times.

Were I to be tasked with bringing down this citadel, I would surely shed a tear.

Partly out of habit, I ran through possible invasion routes in my head as we ran alongside the ramparts and made our way behind the fort, whereupon I saw a well-worn wooden door set into the castle wall. It seemed that through the door was the citadel’s interior. The mouse squeezed through the gap under the door, which swung open easily at my touch, and as I advanced through the portal, I saw a descending staircase lit by torchlight. Seeing my hesitation at the prospect of going underground, the mouse squeaked in impatience.

“I get it! I’m comin’ down right now!”

As expected, Thirteenth was waiting there in the basement. *I was at the point where I could expect these things?*

This wasn’t the vast underground chamber we had been summoned to, but rather a normal—although I’m a bit reluctant in calling it that—room with a lived-in feel.

There were many bookshelves and lots of paper, and in the middle of this disorderly yet orderly room sat Thirteenth stiffly in his chair, looking very much like an evil sorcerer.

The mouse scurried into the chamber, crawled up onto Thirteenth’s shoulder, gobbled up some crumbs of bread, and scampered off elsewhere.

“Was that your first time seeing a familiar?”

Thirteenth looked with somewhat sleepy eyes at the mouse.

“Sorry for frightening you. It was my mistake to treat you as I would a sorcerer.”

“Oh, yeah...it’s fine...you can control animals?”

“So long as they are mentally inferior,” Thirteenth responded succinctly. He stood up as if it took him much effort.

“You have been of great help to Zero. I called you here because I thought I would reward you for your work. —Here, take this.”

Thirteenth reached for an object casually placed on his desk, and held it toward me.

—It was a small bottle. There was nothing strange about it, just a cylindrical bottle stoppered with a cork.

“That’s...”

“I call this magic medicament. It is an application of Zero’s magic. It’s a solution composed of the offerings and methods required for magic, dissolved and sealed in plant oils.”

“Explain like I’m a moron.”

“If you uncork the bottle and water the ground with its contents, the magic sealed within it will take effect.”

My jaw dropped. That meant—in other words, something like—

“Could anyone use magic if they had that? Even me?”

“That’s right. Anyone can.”

My eyes opened wide in surprise. I didn’t accept the bottle from Thirteenth, but merely stared at it in his hand.

Seeing my astonishment, Thirteenth went on.

“It’s nothing to get so worked up over. As of right now, I am the only one able to make this. I continued my research on the side while searching for the book, and spent ten years to produce this innovation. If I were to keep this a secret, it may even be that no one in the next hundred years will be able to make this. Besides, this one is a harmless magic medicament.”

“Ha...harmless ya say?”

“It erases the effects of sorcery.”

I suddenly felt a sort of affinity with the contents of the bottle, and took it from Thirteenth’s hand.

“Why sorcery and not magic?”

“Magic is a simplified form of sorcery. At its heart is still a reliance on the power of demons. In other words, this bottle’s contents can annul both magic and sorcery. For example, if you happened to be trapped in a magic circle, the magic medicament would cause it to lose its power —“

Thirteenth looked me dead in the eyes.

“And were you possessed of that body, you could become human again.”

Slowly, I understood the meaning of Thirteenth’s “gift”.

“You sure understand the contract between the witch and I well, don’tcha?”

“I can just about imagine what else besides coin could cause a bestial warrior like yourself, who’s afraid of and holds contempt for witches, to work for one.”

“Are ya really alright with givin’ this to me? If ya do, I’d have no reason ta stay her mercenary.”

“I did say that I would reward you. In essence, I mean this—leave the castle this instant.”

“...What? Whaddya mean? You don’t got the right to dismiss me.”

“I’m telling you to run. Zero is a terrifying witch. You may be fooled by her pretty face, but she is not someone you can safely accompany.”

“As you can see, I’m completely fine. That, and she told me she ain’t interested in my head.”

“Have you ever thought about why?”

I blinked.

—Why Zero didn’t want my head?

“When Zero invented magic, she summoned forth what could be termed the highest-ranking demon there is, and learned the names of a great deal of demons. In summoning such a powerful demon, what do you think Zero used as an offering?”

“You’re askin’ me...”

Thirteenth gave me a look, like he was telling me to stop feigning ignorance.

I rubbed my neck absently.

“I don’t believe that you think of yourself as a special existence to Zero, yes? To Zero...no, to all sorcerers, every person or thing besides themselves are nothing but objects to be used and expended. The only reason you are still alive and breathing today is because you have a use that requires you to remain this way. Once that use expires, you will become a mere apparatus for use in sorcery.”

Did she really need me?

If she had no need for me, what was Zero—what was the witch going to do to me?

Thirteenth had tacitly foisted the answers to these questions upon me, presenting them as obvious fact.

Sometimes, Zero would develop a frigid expression. Chills ran down my spine each time I heard that Zero mutter “I am displeased” in that emotionless tone.

No, but still—I’d trusted in my abilities and decided to accompany Zero.

“If that woman really was dangerous, a fallen beast like me’d never stay by her side. We’re way better at sensin’ danger than people are.”

## Part 11

Thirteenth shook his head in a silent but forceful repudiation. I felt unsettled, as if he were calling me naive. As if I were ignorant of some obvious mistake I’d made.

“Witches possess the power to charm, and can easily twist the instincts of bestial warriors to view them in a benevolent light. You saw Zero’s eyes, no? The first time you saw her, wherever it was.”

I had.

It was back when Zero, Albus and I had met for the first time—when I first saw Zero use magic to repel Albus. I’d thought that she was strikingly beautiful, and was entranced by her visage. I stared into those eyes, thinking how strange of a color they were. I hadn’t realized then that those were the eyes of a witch.

Hmm, so that was why I hadn’t felt any fear when Zero told me that she’d have me be her guard. I’d been manipulated by her from the very start.

“When I launched my attack against her in the underground chamber, you acted like it was natural to protect her. That’s when I noticed. You were enthralled by Zero, and under her control. There was no way a wary, alert bestial warrior such as yourself would leap to Zero’s defense. There is still time. But that pleasant feeling you gain from accompanying Zero will soon turn into an instinctive servility. I don’t know how long you’ve spent on the road with her...but you’ve seen it at least once, I suspect.”

*Seen what?* I was about to ask when it hit me. The owner of the thrift store who’d gleefully put himself at her service and would’ve licked the mud off her boots if he could’ve.

“Do you wish to become like that? I won’t make a move to stop you if you do. There are many who would prostrate themselves before her. Even in our cave, she was extraordinary.”

“No fuckin’ way! Who’d do that for a witch?!”

Thirteenth’s lips warped slightly. Perhaps he was smiling.

“Zero must be interested in you for that very attitude you possess. Yes, to Zero, you are—  
—just like a novel pet.

For some reason, this man’s words weighed heavily on my chest.

The sheer amount of praise Zero had heaped on me. How she’d said she liked me. That she wanted us to remain together. I realized now that she’d said those things because she didn’t see me as a human at all. It felt exactly like she loved me as she would a cherished cat.

I felt my throat tighten. The area below my tongue tasted strangely bitter.

“Still, she is a fellow student of mine. Zero is the last and only of my compatriots, and I thank you for leading her all this way. —That is why you must run. I cannot help you beyond this, but...”

Thirteenth handed me a travel permit. I had come to Prasta without passing the gate, thanks to Thirteenth’s summons, so if I didn’t have this with me, then there’d be trouble when I tried to leave.

“No, that’s enough. I’m in your debt.”

I hurried back to my quarters and stuffed the bottle into my bag.

Now that I thought about it, I’d felt disturbed by a lot of what Zero’d said in the past. Even when she’d hired me to be her guard, she’d said “I won’t take your head, as a guard needs his limbs.” Did that mean once she didn’t need me as a guard anymore, or if she got tired of me, that she’d chop off my head? —This was fuckin’ serious!

On top of that, I couldn’t remain involved with witches. She was a devastatingly good looking woman, but I valued my life above the desires of my body’s lower half. What I wanted from Zero was now in my possession, too. All this considered, why did I need to stay here? I was a man who’d take his supper over the world any day. If I could become a human again and live my days without being chased by witches, then I wouldn’t give a shit about whether or not they had been wiped out.

Ah, yeah. I’d go back to the country. My old mom ’n pops were probably running the bar even now. I hadn’t seen ‘em for over ten years now. They might not even believe that I was their fallen beast kid once I became human, but I’d cross that bridge when I come to it. I’d even be fine as just a wanderin’ traveler earnin’ his keep. Eventually, I’d get hitched to a cute girl. Heck, It’d even be okay even if she wasn’t cute. A naggin’, strong woman’d be good. The kinda woman who’d hit me.

I’d want three or more kids. Every day’d be busy and tough and irritating. We’d get into arguments and shout. I want that kind of life. I can be human again. I can be human. And as a human, I’ll be able to live.

*How many times have I dreamt that dream now?* I burst out of my room and froze in place.

“—Are you getting ready for a journey, mercenary? Without me?”



Zero was standing before the doorway. Amazingly, I didn't yell in surprise.

Wearing a strange expression, Zero acted as if this were all a coincidence and gazed up at me.

"If you are leaving, then you do plan to bring me along, no? You *are* my mercenary after all. Perfect timing as well. Thirteenth got so worked up about this and that that he could barely breathe. I will be taking my leave with—"

Zero took a step toward me.

Reflexively, I retreated a step. Zero paused at my odd behavior.

"...Mercenary, did something happen? Why do you remain silent?"

This bewildered act—not bad, Ms. Witch.

How did she know? Was she watching me this whole time to make sure I wouldn't escape?

"Why do you look at me like that...? I just want to head out for a bit. Today's the goddess' day of the week, and I heard that there are performers putting on a show in town square. I would like to see what all the fuss is about. Let's—"

Without waiting for her to finish, I gripped my sword.

I had to get away from this witch. Otherwise, only death awaited me. Though I didn't think I could win against her head on—. I glanced around for a getaway route. Should I go back into my quarters and jump out the window? Should I take the witch by surprise and shove her out of my way? This was a matter of life and death.

"Ah...is that so."

The witch, who'd been looking at me in evident confusion, unexpectedly made a face that resembled a smile. However, it was quite bitter for a smile.

"Were you deceived by Thirteenth? A most devilish performance as always. He was able to take in my mercenary so easily..."

*What the hell're ya goin' on about? You're the one that deceived me.*

As I scowled at her, the witch abruptly locked eyes with me.

*Shit. Those eyes—if I look at them—*

"This—fool!!" Zero roared. I instinctively covered my ears. Somehow, that slender body made this fearsome noise. Zero advanced toward me, and snapped her fingers before my eyes.

Immediately, I felt as if I were waking from a dream. The urgent need I felt to get out of this castle and away from Zero disappeared in that instant.

“What caused you to doubt, mercenary?”

“Um...uh...”

“What did you doubt? What angered you? Your confidence in me wavered, and that is what Thirteenth pounced on! Thirteenth really *is* skillful. He is a prodigy of fanning the flames of unease and inciting doubt, converting them into bonfires of fear and rage.”

The last part of her sentence was delivered in a strained voice. Without seeing her clenched fist trembling, I never would have imagined this from the frank and dignified Zero I knew.

Zero glared at me, clenching her teeth as if she were holding something back. It was behavior like that of a child trying to restrain her tears.

“I—“

“Did Thirteenth tell you that I intend to kill you?”

I was startled, but didn’t say a word.

—It felt like she was asking me if I’d betrayed her. Unable to bear the brunt of her gaze, I turned to look at my bed.

“And you—you believed those words? No matter how much sorcery is laced within them, words have only the power to nurture the seeds of doubt. Fire cannot be born without embers. This means, in other words, that you were fraught with doubt—even until now—toward me! If you’re going to doubt me, then why did we form a pact in the first place?!”

I felt like I was bursting to say something. The only problem was that I didn’t know what to say. The words caught in my throat, and seemed almost to clog up my windpipe.

“I swore, mercenary. I swore through our blood pact not to take your head! I swore to make you human again!”

I turned my eyes to the scar on Zero’s thumb. It hadn’t been many days since she had made the incision.

—*I swear, mercenary.*

I remembered Zero, cradling her bloodstained thumb as if it were a matter of the utmost importance, swearing her oath. No, that too had been merely an act. It had definitely been nothing more than an act. She was a witch after all. But if that had been just an act, then why was Zero now wearing such a pained expression—a hair’s breadth from bursting into tears?

*Sigh*, all of Zero’s strength seemed to vacate her body.

“...So, you really do hate witches.”

*Damn right I hate witches. They all want to take my fuckin' head.*

Though I thought so, why did that defeated, drained voice cause such an ache in my heart?

“Then I suppose you had no need for me to lend a hand and return you to sanity...Just as you scared away the children, now that I think about it, should I have done the same to you?”

Return me to sanity?

*—Am I sane now? What was I earlier, then? Is she trying to say that my initial, pressing desire to leave this castle, even this kingdom behind, wasn't sane?*

Zero whirled around, turning on her heel.

“Leave my presence. —You may run away. From me, that is. Do not worry, I will not pursue you.”

“Uh...”

“This is the end of our partnership. I will not turn you human, and you will no longer protect me. —And at any rate, it seems to me that Thirteenth has given you a substitute for me. Farewell, mercenary. It was enjoyable for what it was.”

Zero walked off without so much as a backward glance, the hem of her overcoat swirling behind her. Then, thanks to my sensitive ears, I heard a whisper. It was a small, fragile voice.

“I didn't employ—someone like you.”

With those words as her last, Zero disappeared around a corner in the corridor. —It was a brisk parting. Not even the sound of her footsteps remained.

Zero never did turn around, and so I never did call out for her to stop.

The words that had caught in my throat, accompanied by a dull pain, slowly but steadily made their way down into the depths of my stomach.

*It might not be too late if I chase after her now.* But no matter how I tried, my feet refused to move.

I won't go looking for her... I have no reason to.

Still I stood for a long while, filled with lingering regret, in the passageway Zero had departed.

## **Chapter 5 – Immolation**

五章  
火刑



## Part 1

Eventually, I did leave the castle.

What was true, and what wasn't? Since when was I mad, and what did it mean to be sane? I felt as if my brains had turned to mush, and that I was free-floating. But I did know one thing for certain: I had lost my right to stay at the castle the moment I'd let Zero walk away.

I had stopped being Zero's mercenary. Even worse, it might've been of my own accord.

The castle seemed to be built on top of a cliff, as there was a long, descending staircase outside the side gate. That was the lone path linking the castle to its surrounding lands, and the likes of merchants and servants traversed incessantly this tediously long path. Slipping into the current of pedestrians, I set off down the walkway.

I took a single backward glance.

*Idiot, who would've thought you to actually run away? I was joking. Be more perceptive.*

I might've felt a little anticipation for Zero to come chasing after me angrily, saying those words. How foolish of me.

At the end of the seemingly interminable steps was a tremendous gate, where I was stopped by soldiers for not having a record of entry. Though when I showed them Thirteenth's paper of passage, I was able to get through without trouble. Thirteenth didn't seem trustworthy at first glance, but I thought he was very much so. Stepping through the gate, I found myself in an immense circular plaza with performers leaping and bounding left and right, attracting crowds of onlookers and encouraging them to toss coin into their collection hats.

Oh, right. Zero had indeed said today was the day of the weekly goddess festival. Just as one would expect from the imperial capital. It was remarkably lively, even compared to Foamicaum.

In the middle of the busy plaza was a mountain of straw, a stout log sprouting from its peak.

I gave the air a sniff. A charred odor permeated the square. They'd burned something big here. There were clear scorch marks visible on a large expanse of the ground.

I was pretty sure that if that pile of straw were to be set aflame, it'd leave behind marks just like those.

“—Burnin' at the stake, eh?”

I looked up at the wooden pole. I knew that countless witches had been bound to that pole before. The straw would be set aflame. The conflagration would spread. The encroaching heat and the enshrouding smoke. The agonized, violent coughing of the witch and her agitated shrieks. Finally,

the inferno would spread to the witch's clothes, her hair would be set ablaze, and the crowd would let out a resounding cheer—it was as if I could see it all happen before me.

I shouldn't have to worry about Zero getting burned at the stake, as she was under Thirteenth's protection.

—Still, I felt strangely annoyed.

I hate witches. I think it'd be a great thing if witches all got exterminated. Burn 'em at the stake? Cut their heads clean off? Both options are great. Just make sure they don't die too quickly. 'Till recently, that was exactly how I felt about witches.

But Zero—even Albus—if those two were tied to the stake and set ablaze, would I cheer with the rest? I couldn't imagine myself doing that.

I hate witches. But there were exceptions to my hate. I learned that not all witches were evil. Even so, though, I was afraid of Zero.

I felt a vague fear of witches, in addition to other unpleasant sentiments. It was a prejudice that wouldn't go away.

It was exactly like how people were scared of me simply for being a fallen beast.

I gave my head a rough scratching.

“Stop this shit, stop it! Just forget this nonsense!”

It was over. I was Zero's mercenary no longer, and moreover, I'd betrayed her. She'd given up on me as well. I spat on the ground and, ignoring the strange looks I got for being a yelling giant, quickly took my leave.

“I should be relieved. It was a stupid job to begin with, and I should be happy it ended well. I even got a gift out of it,” I said in a deliberately happy tone, and checked inside the pouch I carried at my waist. Thirteenth's bottle was chilly to the touch of my beastly fingertip.

This was all I'd wanted. A way to return to being human—that was it.

There were currently a lot of fallen beasts in Prasta, thanks to its efforts to raise an army. The residents seemed used to the sight of fallen beasts, as there wasn't anyone shrieking at my presence or trying to stone me, as far as I could tell. Even so, I pulled the hood of my mantle down over my head, concealing my features.

Soon, though, I'll be able to say farewell to this face. I can go back to being human at any time.

When, where, and how should I do it?

This planning should have made my heart race in excitement, but instead my emotions felt strangely flat as I did so.

In the end, I decided to wait until I'd moved to a slightly safer country before turning myself back. I couldn't say it was a good plan to be a powerless human in Wenias while it and the witches were waging war.

It should be fine for me to just walk back to Foamicaum. The stagecoaches were fascinating and all, but it'd be fruitless if they just refused to let me board, and even then, the other passengers' suspicious gazes would make me feel uncomfortable.

Horses are, by nature, easily scared. This was why so few drivers of horse-drawn carriages would allow fallen beasts to ride. Horses would get too spooked to do their jobs merely from being close to a fallen beast. Hated by humans, hated by animals, I had nowhere to belong to, as my own kind did not live together. This was the life of a fallen beast.

Words will fade naturally from memory.

As I walked alone on the path, I realized that just a few days ago—after having met Zero and Albus—we'd passed through here, chatting as we did. I'd asked questions, Zero'd provided the answers, and when Albus'd interrupted us, I'd whacked him. That was the kind of exchange we'd had, day and night, over and over again.

## Part 2

*Yeah. It's just like you said, Zero. It was fun for what it was.*

And the silence that had been missing from my life returned, surprisingly heavier than before.

*—Hey merc, lemme ride on your shoulder too. It's not fair that Zero always gets to and I don't!*

*—Why do I gotta put someone who wants ta take my head closer to my head?*

*—Just for today, I wont! I swear I won't! Hey, let me feel your fur. It was muddy yesterday but now it's all fluffy, no? Come on, Zero! Switch with me!*

*—I am this mercenary's employer and a striking lady. That is to say, this is my chair, and I will not be surrendering it to you.*

—*Who you callin' a chair? Don't think I won't throw ya off, ya stupid witch.*

I smiled at the memory.

The whiny kid and the arrogant woman; no matter how I'd yelled at or threatened the two of 'em, neither of them thought any worse of me for it. There had to have been someone like that in my life before them, right? But as I tried to think of one, I realized it was a futile task. The answer was obvious. There hadn't been a single person like that.

What this meant was that the only two people in my life to have treated me as an equal were a witch and a sorcerer, both of whose professions I'd hated. Sure, it was the witches who made us fallen beasts, but I thought it was very ironic.

Heaving a sigh, I looked skyward.

I thought back to when Zero'd squinted and said the sky sure is blue. She'd said that she'd never before taken a single step outside of the cave she'd been born and raised in.

And there she'd stayed—after Thirteenth'd left—all alone.

—*Thirteenth and I. All of the witches who had lived in our cave were killed, besides the two of us.*

I shuddered at the thought.

She'd lived in the cave, where her comrades had died, for ten years. Just how lonely was it for her to simply await Thirteenth's return, without having the chance to converse with another living being?

In the cave Zero'd lived in,  
was there a blue sky to gaze at?

The sky I was seeing right now was as blue as always, but somehow, it seemed different than before.

It took a carriage half a day to get to Foamicaum—so for me, it was about a day and a half on foot.

Night arrived before I could reach the city gates, so I got a fire going and made preparations to camp out for the night.

I laid my head on my pack and shut my eyes.

—*Mercenary.*

All of a sudden, I heard Zero's voice. There was no mistake that it was a hallucination, but she'd called for me so frequently that there was an echo left in my ears.

When she'd called, I'd answered. As if to say how fun she found just that to be, she'd called for me, talked to me, and asked for my opinions innumerable times.

—*Let's go together*—

I'll never forget Zero's face the moment I refused her request.

I got up.

The words trapped in my stomach were still swirling around, all jumbled up.

"Shit..."

I wasn't sure why, but I'd been unable to apologize. I'd been unable to swear that I didn't doubt her. I'd been unable to swear that I'd uphold our contract till the very end, that I wouldn't be going anywhere—I'd been unable to say any of those things.

It was too late anyway. How could I go back to her now? Having realized this very fact, I didn't even like I could take a crestfallen breath.

However, my melancholy didn't last long.

I caught the scent of beasts. The scent of a fallen beast—the scent of my own kind.

"...I don't got anythin', if you're thinkin' about robbin' me."

Raising my voice so that whoever it was could hear me, I unsheathed my sword. There were plenty of bandits who'd just leave at this point. It wouldn't even be my financial situation that'd be the impetus. It was extremely difficult to kill a fallen beast, unless one were to succeed at launching a surprise attack, and even if one had accomplices, there was still an ample chance that they'd be the ones taking a beating instead. Still, as for why anyone'd risk such danger and attack a fallen beast, one possible reason could be to behead them and sell the head to a witch, while another—

"All you gotta do is let me kill ya, and I'll be on my way."

Could be to exact vengeance.

When I saw a furless doglike face emerge from behind a tree, I couldn't help but grimace.

I remembered. It was the mutt Zero'd stripped the fur from at the inn.

"Hey, you've got it all wrong. It ain't my fault that your fur's all gone, yeah?"

"It sure as hell is! Don't think you're fuckin' foolin' me!"

*It wasn't me, it was Zero, Zero!* While I repeated that in my mind, I continued playing dumb.

"Let's say it was."

I hoisted my sword onto my shoulder, and looked down at dog-face. I was far larger than he was.

"What're ya gonna do 'bout it, dog face? You wanna fight me?"

"You see, I ain't gonna fight."

Fallen beasts have a great sense of their surroundings. That was why normal ambushes would never succeed against us.

However, with a fallen beast right in front of me blazing with killing intent, it was to be expected that my rear guard would be lax. —And so it was.

In the next moment, an arrow of light lanced through my torso from back to front, and I opened my eyes wide in shock.

"What the...!"

It was magic—Staim. So there must be a witch nearby. It was impossible to tell whether it was one of the Coven of Zero or a wayward sorcerer, but seeing the leer on dog-face's mug, I understood the situation.

"You bastard...you sold me out, ya fuckin' mutt!"

Dog-face'd probably been attacked by a witch lookin' for fallen beast heads and told them he'd help them catch an even rarer fallen beast in exchange for his life. Canine fallen beasts have incredible noses. I could imagine that he'd tracked me, having taken a whiff of my scent once before, and led the witch here.

I began yelling in rage, but was silenced by what happened next. Dog-face, whom I'd been yelling at, found himself with an arrow of light through his abdomen as well. In a flash, his grinning face was painted over by an expression of agony. He fell on his hands and knees, and coughed up dark red blood.

A howl of pain followed soon after.

*You meant to sell me out but ended up getting yourself captured as well. Still gonna grin, son of a bitch?*

## Part 3

"It missed—he's still standing!"

A shrill, feminine cry of astonishment rang out from behind a nearby tree.

Should I run for it, or should I fight back? It took me but a moment to come to my decision. I could fight—I could win. Perhaps it was the result of having seen an unusual battle between a witch and a sorcerer, but my fear of witches seemed to have dulled.

I drew my knife from my belt and threw it in the direction of the sound, whereupon I heard an exclamation of pain accompanied by the sound of a body crumpling to the ground.

Covering the distance between me and the location of the sound in one stride, I held down the fallen witch while yanking out the knife lodged in her shoulder, and pressed it against the nape of her neck. I was reluctant to hurt a woman, almost to the point of nausea, but she was a witch so I couldn't risk leniency.

"H-how dare you do this...how dare youuu!"

"How dare you try to take the lives of others? That's a pretty shitty thing to do too."

I spat on the ground and grimaced. I didn't need to ask her what she was trying to do, nor why she was trying to kill me in particular. The fact that she was a witch and I was a fallen beast was explanation enough.

But this seemed different than usual. I didn't care that much about being hunted for my head at this point, but to borrow Zero's words—I was just a bit displeased.

In the darkness of night, my attacker, who was glaring at me in panic and hatred, looked like a normal human. It was often said not to judge a person by his or her looks, but those looks would adapt to the job the person did. Those who were bandits had faces that screamed "bandit", and Zero, Albus, as well as Thirteenth all had a certain air unique to witches.

However, this one did not. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, perhaps late twenties—and had an air about her more like that of a hardworking woman who sells old clothes at the market.

Albus had said that as long as one wanted it, one could learn the ways of magic. So it seemed that she had.

Though, her determination seemed very different from that of bandits who wanted my head for the coin it would fetch, and that of those who'd never hurt a fly and wanted my head for the power it would grant.

"Hey miss...lemme ask ya somethin'. Did ya come for me knowin' that you could get killed? What did ya think would happen if a young girl were to attack a fallen beast?"

"Ah...n-no—!"

"It ain't 'no'. I'd say 'no' to dyin' too. Miss, if ya aren't prepared to be killed yourself, then ya shouldn't try to kill someone else. People like that will only get themselves killed."

“Please don’t kill me! I didn’t mean to—I didn’t expect it to be like this! I finally had some power... my life was supposed to get better!”

So this was it. This kind of begging for one’s life always got to me.

“Get lost—next time, I’ll kill ya, ya hear?”

I put down my knife and got off her back. When I did so she let out a horrible scream, and ran off into the thicket. If only she would learn from this experience and become a little more mature... but if she were to come back with a group for revenge, I wouldn’t stand a chance.

“That’s a point for Thirteenth, ain’t it...”

I eyed the moon and let the tension out of my shoulders. —Truly, things were running wild.

The problem wasn’t those who’d been witches for a long time. It was the normal people who’d learned magic. It was the powerless who’d become drunk on power.

A band of mercenaries who’d lost their leader would immediately become a band of bandits. Same for the knights of the kingdom; if the nation were to collapse, they’d just join the hooligans. They had to be purged, assembled, and governed; order had to be restored. The state of magic was much the same. There needed to be laws governing those who practiced it, and punishments for those who broke those laws. There also needed to be people to carry out those punishments. The fact that there were guilds for every profession wasn’t just because they allowed people to provide each other with mutual assistance, but also because it allowed people to watch each other. Licenses and letters patent—all these kinds of permits were part of a system created to protect the world from certain crafts that had the potential to bring its downfall.

Magic as a skill was very powerful, and as a result there wasn’t a method of regulating its use. Assuming the Coven of Zero had such a system, it would be as if their system didn’t exist, since one could simply leave if one didn’t want to be punished. Either way, magic had already spread too far.

“I can’t believe she wrote such a bothersome book.”

When I spat again, I saw in my mind’s eye Zero looking at me with dissatisfaction written all over her face.

I wiped my knife clean of blood and returned it to its scabbard, went over to dog-face, who was lying face-down, and nudged his head with the tip of my boot.

## Part 4

*Argh*, dog-face groaned and glared painfully at me. Having no coat of fur, his appearance looked ridiculous.

“How are ya...completely fine?! I saw you...I swear I saw you...get run through!!”

Indeed, I had thought so too, but my body was free of wounds.

“I guess she was just a quack witch.”

“She got me though, so there’s no fuckin’ way!”

“You’re just a quack mercenary then. You’re a piece of shit for settin’ that annoyin’ witch on me. I had ta hurt a woman thanks to you. But in the end, you’re the one that got done in, so I guess you’re the laughin’ stock now, huh, dog-face?”

“Didn’t I tell ya I’m not a dog?! I’m a wolf! Fuckin’ get it right! Solena personally bestowed me with the soul of a wolf, so I know it for a fact!”

In the middle of his howl, dog-face choked and spat out blood. A hole seemed to have opened in his stomach due to the hollow in his abdomen. A fallen beast wouldn’t die from a wound like this, but the pain would still be considerable. But what mattered now wasn’t how badly he was hurt. The guy’d just said—

“Solena...bestowed you with...?”

Dog-face gave me an ear-to-ear smile. I could tell he was proud of himself for knowing something I didn’t, which irritated me greatly. I contemplated killing him, but stopped that savage train of thought before it went far.

“You’re the sort that thinks bein’ a fallen beast is ‘cause’a misdeeds in a previous life, eh? That makes me laugh. If you could get a great body like this just by doin’ shitty things in past lives, I’d be stainin’ my hands in this life with as many evil deeds as I could.”

“Ain’t they already stained?”

“Hardly!”

“But ya used ta hunt down normal women and say they were witches, right?”

“That’s just a by-product of a manhunt...they got handed over to me, so I just took ‘em along for the ride! Sure...I did choose ‘em...but I thought about lettin’ ‘em go sometime...”

“So not only are ya a shitty person at heart, but you’re makin’ shitty excuses too...besides, that’s not what I asked ya about. You got turned into a fallen beast by Solena?”

*Heh, heh*, The self-proclaimed wolf that was dog-face gave a pained laugh. He had no fur, so his sweat dripped, drop by drop, into a pool of his dark red blood.

“I didn’t get turned into one! I chose to be a fallen beast. The great Solena herself granted me the noble soul of a wolf! What’s wrong? If you’re scared, then...”

Dog-face broke off mid-sentence and hugged his stomach, collapsing to the ground.

“H-help me close this hole in my abdomen...I’ll die if I keep losin’ blood...”

“I don’t really care if ya die though.”

“I care!! Hey, I’m sorry ‘bout earlier, ‘kay?! But I can’t die! Solena ordered me to find little lady! She’d disappeared, and I’m lookin’ for her in this kingdom! I swear!”

## Part 5

“So, I was the third son of an aristocratic family, unable to inherit a noble’s status, and had to serve as an officer in the king’s castle...but my male resourcefulness—or should I call it my animalistic instinct now—was always very strong. How should I put it...’S long as the girl was pretty, I didn’t care a bit about her social status or whether she was married or not.”

“...You’re tellin’ me that ya made a move on someone else’s wife ‘n got kicked outta the knights’ ranks?”

Dog-face laughed riotously.

“Nah, it turned into a big deal that ended up just a couple’a inches away from a duel. The kinda rage you’d expect from somethin’ like ‘thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s wife’. Regardless, I was a guy so sexy all the ladies wanted a portrait of me, ya know? Well, I still am good lookin’ though.”

*At least wait ‘till your hair grows back to say that, buffoon*, I wanted to spout, but resisted the urge since it wouldn’t do me any good to cut his story off.

“Good lookin’ men stand out, yeah? That made my escape a lot harder. I ran into the woods, and when I fell and couldn’t go any further, Solena came along ‘n picked me back up. Can ya believe it? I’d always thought she was an old lady, but she was a crazy looker of a lady! I begged her to let me stay with her, but she told me she wasn’t interested in a weak human. So, I told her I’d do anything, even if I had to become a monster...”

“So, a fallen beast...?”

“‘Cause I didn’t give a shit about my old body. If I turned into a fallen beast, I might get looked down on, but no one would chase me. Besides, I could still do whatever I wanted.”

“Witches are yer natural enemy though. Even if Solena doesn’t attack you, other witches will.”

“They usually don’t. They can make their own fallen beast heads after all.”

—That was interesting. But I’d kept having my own head hunted by witches, Albus being one of them. When I asked dog-face about it, he continued with his explanation.

“The thing is, only greenhorn witches who can’t perform the Beastgranting ritual will hunt for fallen beasts’ heads. The people who buy pricey fallen beasts heads from bandits are noblewomen who have lots of spare time and an obsession with summonin’ demons. Wenias’ witches’ve been huntin’ fallen beasts only for a year or so, when the fightin’ started gettin’ intense, so back when I chose to be a fallen beast, that danger didn’t exist.”

*And I could fight off any bandits easy,* concluded dog-face.

So it seemed that the witches who’d kept chasing me around for my head weren’t real witches, but mocks who had just started out in sorcery and had too much free time on their hands. So if that were true, then Zero’d have no need for my head.

“N so, I lived a carefree life with Solena ’n little lady...”

One day though, a plague broke out, and Solena was falsely accused and executed for it. Her granddaughter was bent on revenge, and since dog-face had been told by Solena to take care of her granddaughter, he had naturally opposed the granddaughter’s decision. But it seemed that this ‘little lady’ left dog-face and joined the Coven of Zero instead. Now, dog-face was growing desperate to find her and had spent this year gathering information on the Coven for that purpose.

“With money and strength, I extracted intelligence from wayward sorcerers. —But, I’ve got no idea of the whereabouts of the book you’re lookin’ for. It’s not like there’d be a record of it joinin’ the Coven, after all.”

“That’s a useless dog for ya...”

“Didn’t I just fuckin’ tell ya that I’m a wolf?! Do ya really want me to explain to ya the difference between a dog and a wolf?!”

“That’s a useless wolf for ya...” I said, unaffected. As if dog-face’d given up, his tail drooped and his shoulders slumped.

“Well...the chance that ‘that person’ has it is next to zero, so it’s probably Solena’s granddaughter...”

“How can ya say for sure?”

“No one’s ever seen ‘that person’ before, that’s how. ‘That person’ is just someone that’s said ta exist, and has no direct influence over the Coven of Zero... except when dealin’ out punishments.”

“Punishments? How’s that happen if ‘that person’ doesn’t show themselves?”

“Witches sign their statements of loyalty in their own blood. What that means is that if these witches break their vow of loyalty to ‘that person’, then they get annihilated. For some reason they define “loyalty” pretty vaguely.”

Dog-face indicated that the Coven of Zero was bound tight with rules and regulations.

This had to be part of fighting for the just cause of peace and harmony for all witches. The witches who couldn’t take these rules and left the Coven of Zero were the so-called wayward sorcerers.

“So, do wayward sorcerers not get punished?”

“Sometimes they do, ’n sometimes they don’t. It’s true that they don’t get punishment just for leavin’, though. A famous case was when a bunch of wayward sorcerers plunderin’ a town they occupied got annihilated. They tried ta ambush Thirteenth, who’d come to stamp ‘em out, and took some hostages from the town, but every one of ‘em got annihilated by ‘that person’s punishment before they even got to fight Thirteenth.”

But the witches that attacked La Tête, which lay at the heartland of the academy, didn’t receive any punishment and were crushed by Thirteenth. —Sometimes punishment was delivered, sometimes not. It was an ambiguous contract indeed.

Once they found out that they could break the rules a bit without consequence, idiots would do all the stupid shit in the book until they really did get punished. If the contents of the blood contract were something like “destroy this person if he or she leaves the Coven,” then there would be no wayward sorcerers.

“Solena didn’t like the Coven of Zero from the beginning. She said that “magic is an amazing means to an end, but that way of teaching it is wrong.” Then, she got burned to death by ‘that person.’”

“Wait, hold on a sec. Wasn’t it the villagers that were scared of the plague who burned Solena at the stake?”

“What if that plague was caused by sorcery?”

My eyes widened.

“Someone caused that plague with sorcery. That’s why Solena suppressed it with sorcery. Solena was set up. It was apparent that if Solena used sorcery in that situation, the villagers would make the mistake of lockin’ up Solena instead. There’s no proof that ‘that person’ did it, but that’s what I think.”

I didn't know whether or not dog-face's hunch was right. But if it was, then 'that person' not only killed Zero's mentor and stole the Book of Zero ten years ago, but likewise killed Solena a year ago.

"I...couldn't protect Solena. That's why I absolutely have ta find little lady. I have ta protect her!"

*Pop*, the campfire crackled, and embers went floating on the wind.

I never heard of fallen beasts gathering together, but we had no choice here. On top of the location of 'that person' being a complete mystery, the person closest to the Book of Zero was dog-face's "little lady".

## Part 6

It looked like our interests were in alignment—I wasn't against working with dog-face toward our goals, as I was by and large a utilitarian.

"Do ya have any leads or anythin'?"

Dog-face snapped to attention.

"Like I said, I'm lookin' for the Book of Zero. If yer 'little lady' has it, then I've got some business with her. I'll help ya find her, but I'll be takin' the book in exchange."

If I found the book and took it back to that woman, how would she react to my return? There was a ninety percent chance that she'd become angry, peeved, or offended—instead of just thanking me. *I was going to reclaim that myself; this is for me alone to deal with; you betrayed me, and you mean to return to me now with this?* She'd grumble, and snatch the book out of my hands.

Would she make me her mercenary again if I apologized for doubting her?

"—But that witch you were draggin' around...where's she now?"

Suspicious that he had just read my mind, I turned toward dog-face with a start.

"She smelled a bit like little lady, that one. Witches're hard ta track by smell 'cause they're covered with the odors of medicinal herbs 'n such, but there was a lingerin' scent I could sense. I tried ta make sure, but I got turned into this..."

"Oh, that thing back then..."

When we'd first bumped into dog-face at the inn in Foamicaum, he'd taken an interest in Zero's scent because he'd picked up a bit of little lady's scent. *But that doesn't mean ya lost yer fur 'cause ya tried ta confirm what you were smellin', dog-face. It was 'cause your very existence bothered Zero 'n I, I tried to convey through my expression, but of course dog-face didn't get the message.*

"I was always with that witch though...can't ya smell it on me?"

"Nah, fallen beasts smell too much for a lingerin' scent ta last. I think I can smell it a bit from you—no, it's there."

Dog-face opened his eyes wide.

"You, where were you before now? There's a big chance little lady might still be there!"

I was in Prasta only briefly, and before that, in desolate La Tête. Which naturally meant that the last time I had been in contact with a lot of people was back in Foamicaum.

"Seems that we need ta set course fer Foamicaum then. Your little lady's probably in that neighborhood."

Oddly enough, the horse-drawn carts going from Foamicaum to Prasta seemed hurried this day.

This was a path to the imperial capital, which meant busy traffic, but I thought that things were calmer when I was plodding along yesterday. We'd already had several close calls with horse carriages today, nearly colliding headlong with them. In the end, we moved into the woods running alongside the highway to avoid an accident.

"Hey bro."

*Who the fuck are ya callin' yer bro? I ain't like you, ya dog-faced wolf.*

I frowned as hard as I could while looking over my shoulder at dog-face, who was walking rather spiritedly for someone with a hole in his abdomen.

"Ain't there any way ta get my fur back? Little lady's gonna laugh at me for lookin' like this. It sucks ta have clothes rubbin' right up against me. The wind's blowin' right by it too. It's cold. Seriously."

"Well, I can't help ya with that, can I? Go ask a witch, not me."

"The one in the fortress at the capital? Ya wanna tell me how?!"

"I dunno. If ya promise ta treat 'em to a meal, they might just help ya."

"Can ya please take this seriously?!" Dog-face pleaded in a pitiable tone, whimpering the way a dog would. I'd sort of seriously thought that a meal would be enough, but—perhaps it wasn't very logical after all.

Just then, another carriage moving with unusual haste appeared on the highway. Snatches of conversation wafted from the passenger car:

"—A witch's execution—"

I heard only that single phrase. Instinctively, I looked over my shoulder toward dog-face.

“...They say there’s going to be a witch’s execution at noon today—“

I realized my fur was standing on end.

—*Cooperate, or burn at the stake.*

Thirteenth’d forced Albus to make his choice between the two. He was promised further knowledge if he bowed to Thirteenth, and a fiery death if he refused. No way, I thought.

No way it was Albus. I set off at breakneck pace for the kingdom’s capital.

—*Noon this day, a witch’s execution will be taking place in the capital’s central plaza.*

The morning of, a notice worded thus had been swiftly disseminated, and sightseers crowded the square. I ran without caring about the risk of dog-face’s abdominal wound opening up, and now, it was slightly before noon—the sun was just approaching its zenith. One nice thing about being a fallen beast was that when running, my top speed matched that of a horse-drawn carriage. I was no match for an unburdened horse, but I was about as fast as one pulling a cart loaded with bulky luggage.

I dove into the crowd, pushing people aside, and arrived at a plaza packed with a sea of bystanders. I saw from afar that a figure was bound tight to the enormous post that stood in the square.

No way—it was Albus. My prediction was spot on.

“What the hell’s that dumbass doin’?! Why’d he go against Thirteenth?!”

Even from my distant vantage point, I could see Albus’s trembling frame, threatening to give out at any moment. However, his face was by no means hidden. He glared openly at the throng of onlookers, and his gaze caught mine for an instant.

He pursed his lips. —Albus had noticed me.

*Idiot, who’re ya pretendin’ to be brave for? You’re gettin’ put to death, burned at the stake, for that matter. It’s gonna be long ’n painful. Do ya understand, ya brat?*

“That’s...bro...you said that’s someone ya know?” asked dog-face, gasping for air as he finally caught up, narrowing his eyes.

“He’s some kid sorcerer that attacked me. I made him take us to his academy, ’n he got captured by Thirteenth—but when he got ta choose between servin’ Thirteenth and gettin’ burned alive, that shit picked the latter!”

“Huuuh. That’s pretty brave of ‘em,” replied dog-face nonchalantly as he scrutinized the faraway stake.

“...Hey bro.”

“What?!”

*Ah shit, I answered him. Now I’m stuck being his bro, damn it.*

“That child...does the child have blond hair?”

“What about it?”

“And golden irises?”

It was true; Albus did in fact have eyes the color of gold. How did dog-face know that Albus had golden eyes though? At this distance, there was no way that a canine—even a lupine—fallen beast could determine the color of Albus’ eyes.

“Little lady...”

—Little lady?

What did he mean by that? Albus was a guy. I began to ask dog-face, but silence quickly fell over the noisy square. I looked back to the center of the plaza. Thirteenth was standing there.

The hem of his robes appeared to drag along the platform, and he wielded a hefty staff. His back was hunched, and he wore a dark expression. The man who looked the very picture of an evil sorcerer stood as the arbiter of justice at the stake.

“—Today, we will immolate a witch.”

Thirteenth’s low voice quietly reverberated through the plaza. Beside him, Albus was still tied fast to the beam.

*Today, we will immolate a witch, he says. That’s puttin’ it real lightly ain’t it, Thirteenth?*

“You must not feel compassion simply because it appears to be a child. What you should consider is how many humans this witch has killed thus far, and how many more it will kill in the future.”

Thirteenth stressed the word *witch* as he spoke. I understood his intent. He was telling the people that witches were something other than human.

Through this, they would stop seeing witches as human. The masses would think of them as evils which deserved to die, and gradually, they would be able to cheer and be jubilant at the sight of the screaming figures burning to death.

In any era and any nation, during times of war, the enemy armies would be cursed at and badmouthed as rubbish and bugs to be squashed. There was always special significance to the practice. The significance was in providing an indubitable and sufficient reason for having their armies kill other humans, and glorifying their killing.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am also a sorcerer. However, I neither harm humans with sorcery, nor do I condone the act of inflicting injury upon others. I have never once wished to carry the power of sorcery and use it to further mine own ego!”

The air trembled, almost as if it were about to be torn asunder. Thirteenth’s clear and sonorous voice, along with his words and authoritative posture, earned the onlookers’ rapt attention and kept them perfectly still.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I practice sorcery. However, I am not reluctant to employ that power in purging those who have learned the same sorcery I have and gone astray. Please, I want all of you to direct your hatred toward those evil witches. I wish for all of you understand that sorcery is not evil in and of itself, and that there exists only evil that employs sorcery.”

How could he have the nerve to say that with the same mouth that told me that “witches see others merely as tools, and nothing more”?

Even more horrifying was the fact that there “wasn’t a single lie” in Thirteenth’s words. He presented both statements as true: that other people were simply tools to witches and sorcerers, and that he would not hold back when purging those witches who had strayed from the straight and narrow.

Zero had said that Thirteenth was skilled with the truth. It was the power to “speak without lies”. Born from the confidence that one was dealing with the truth was an attitude of great authority and majesty. People were fooled by this imposing air.

*Doesn’t that make him a great swindler, then?* It seemed that I had been tricked as well. Thirteenth had simply wanted to distance me from Zero. —Was it out of envy? *That’s real honorable ain’t it then, Thirteenth.*

I ground my molars and stared at Thirteenth, admiration and rage coursing through my gaze.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I shall devote myself to serving you. I swear to you that I shall dedicate this body, along with all of the strength I possess, to upholding the peace of this nation. I swear that I shall work toward eradicating all of the evil witches of this land, and protect this kingdom with the power of sorcerers. For that purpose!”

Thirteenth lifted his arms. The eyes of the spectators turned as one toward Albus.

“I!”

Thirteenth paused, briefly and abruptly.

“Will set this witch aflame!”

A joyous roar rose from the crowd. —*The flame, the flame, the flame!*

The shouts rumbled through the plaza, as if making the earth itself shake. Thirteenth, filled with power, raised both arms, and brilliant flames sprang up on the flambeaux around the stake. It was magic. The spectators were as riled up as if they were watching a performance onstage. The audience went wild at the sight of Thirteenth’s magic, drunk on the power of this righteous sorcerer. The knowledge that there was a greater power protecting them incited unparalleled joy among the masses.

I stared at what appeared to be oil-inundated straw around Albus, grinding my teeth together.

*Thirteenth, are ya really gonna burn that kid to death?*

*Zero—Miss Witch. Are ya really gonna allow this? If he can’t help you find your book—if he’s no longer useful—are ya just gonna let him die?*

*And I’m just standin’ here—just watchin’ Albus be killed.*

But then, a shrill voice split the square.

“Listen, my comrades! Listen, all those witches who have decided to fight for our liberation!”

The voice came from the center of the plaza—the voice of Albus, still fastened to the wooden pillar. I was amazed that he could assemble words not to jeer, to despair, or to beg for his life, even as he was about to be executed by fire.

“Today, this body of mine will be burnt to ashes! Just as Solena was a year past. Heed these words, my compatriots! Just as her blaze became the signal fire for war, so let us make this fire into another!”

“—I am the heir to the Witch of the Lunar Chant, who united this land—the great Solena’s successor!”

Albus’ shrill voice, completely different from Thirteenth’s, was filled with power and overwhelmed his surroundings.

Albus was the Witch of the Lunar Chant’s—was Solena’s heir. So it appeared that dog-face was correct.

*Albus, you were a girl this whole time? Not only that, but your grandma was Solena—she's dead, huh. Just like Zero's mentor.*

"Gather, noble witches who long for tranquility and peace! Defeat Thirteenth for the sake of attaining true unity! —All in the great Solena's name!"

The straw was lit aflame. Thanks to the oil, the blaze spread immediately through the straw, and began assailing Albus' small frame.

"—Mercenary!"

On the other side of the raging inferno, Albus looked directly at me. Her lips moved.

—*Save Zero.*

*Are ya stupid? You're surrounded by fire, ya know? Or should I say, how did ya know that I could read lips at this distance? It's not time to be thinking about that though; what's important is what to do now. What to do. What to do. Run, preferably.*

But it was just that a witch I hated was getting burnt up. The idiot chose to get herself burned to death even though there was a choice that would save her. *What the hell're ya tellin' me ta save Zero for? That weird witch ain't gonna have any use for my help. She's got Thirteenth now, anyway.*

*Why did ya say ta defeat Thirteenth though? Didn't ya just confirm that the Coven of Zero is a bad group? Oh, so that's why ya didn't call witches to arms in 'that person's name, but in Solena's. But if you were just gonna do that, I expected you ta join with Thirteenth and have it easier.*

*But if you'd refused and chose death by fire—well, that's what you did.*

*Albus, you—what did you find out in that dungeon?*

"Little lady!" Dog-face shouted and ran off. His flippant attitude had all but disappeared, and his expression was distorted by fear and despair.

*Ah, this is gonna be troublesome. If you go and do that, then I've got no choice but ta do this.*

Before I knew it, I was running and mowing down sightseers. There were two fallen beasts sprinting toward the execution platform. If I were a human there, I'd be quite scared.

The sea of humanity parted to my left and right, making an open path for me. I'd never attracted this much negative attention before in my entire not-so-short life. *Screw you, Albus. Screw you, Thirteenth, dog-face—even Zero, you too.* I pulled an explosive out of the pouch at my waist, and cut its fuse shorter by biting part of the cord off with my teeth. Borrowing the flame from the flambeau, I brandished my explosive vigorously.



“Protect the kid, dog-face! Everyone that doesn’t wanna die, duck yer heads!”

I tossed the bomb at the platform. As everyone—even Thirteenth—plugged their ears and crouched down, I cut through the shockwave and deafening boom from the blast, grabbing dog-face by the nape of his neck. Dog-face was already holding Albus tightly in his arms.

Rather than being dazed by the roar of the explosion, dog-face was alert. *I’m beginnin’ ta like ya, ya bastard of a wolf.*

The blazing pole and straw were sent flying by the detonation and spread the flames all around, causing the square to become an agitated beehive of commotion. The angry shouts from the guards and cries of the onlookers jumbled together, and served as a perfect cover for us to escape.

“The witch is getting away!”

“Archers! Nock your arrows!”

“Stop, hold your fire! —You’ll hit Zero!”

Hearing those shouts from behind me, I bowled over guards and anyone else who stood in my way, stole a horse-drawn cart and an unwilling horse, and with that, sped beyond the city walls.

## **Chapter 6 - Forbidden Spell**



## 第六章 禁呪

## Part 1

It was a miracle that we had managed to stay in one piece.

The horse hated being driven by a fallen beast and went wild, causing our cart to tip over and tumble down a cliff, upon which we were saved by the miraculous presence of a river, and though we were swept downstream and met with misfortunes including torrential rain, if one discounted the moderate burns dog-face had received, we were by and large all right.

After dropping an unconscious Albus off in the middle of the cave we had taken shelter in, I applied some herbal medicine I had foraged onto the entirety of dog-face's back and then dressed the area, wrapping bandages around him. —The day was still young.

"Fur is nature's armor..."

As he worried over his burned and apparently pained back, dog-face gave me an envious look.

Unlike dog-face, who was worn ragged, and Albus, who had slight yet noticeable scratches, I was without injury whatsoever.

"So? How's little lady doin'?"

I looked at Albus, curled up in dog-face's arms as if cold, while I skinned a rabbit I had caught in the forest. I had built a fire to warm the inside of the cavern, but falling in the river had been quite chilling. We had changed Albus into my dried cloak and dog-face had her always in his arms, but I didn't expect a furless fallen beast's embrace to be very warming.

I could have taken his place, but dog-face seemed like he would challenge me to a fight to the death were I to even touch a hair on Albus's head, so I decided against it. I didn't feel anything for the kid's naked figure, though Albus was more or less a woman. —Probably a woman. Even looking at her in this state it was difficult to work out a sex.

In Albus' words, Solena's granddaughter was an attractive person with a voluptuous chest, but that most likely was only how she perceived herself to look.

"She's fine. Just sleepin' 'cause she's tired."

"Good. But...why'd this kid pretend to be a boy and hide the fact that she's Solena's granddaughter?"

"Probably 'cause Thirteenth was lookin' for her, 'n probably 'cause the Coven of Zero made her. Since 'that person' won't show himself, little lady's the heart of the Coven. If little lady were ta get killed, then the rest a' Coven wouldn't last one minute. It was probably decided that she shouldn't tell anyone her true identity besides people she could trust entirely. On top of that, a lone woman travellin' around'd draw suspicion of bein' a witch."

"Ah, right..." I said, slitting open the rabbit's abdomen and pulling out its entrails.

"Uh—" Dog-face exclaimed.

He seemed to have a problem with my move to throw the rabbit's guts away.

"You ain't gonna eat that?"

"I don't eat raw meat."

Dog-face adopted an unusually serious expression at this.

"...Have you felt like ya want to...eat humans?"

I didn't respond.

We fallen beasts are guided by our bestial souls. Those of us who give up all sense of humanity and wholly become beasts end up consuming humans as feed.

Once a fallen beast has reached that point, they will have become nothing more than a monster.

"Have ya...eaten any?"

I laughed bitterly as I speared chunks of rabbit flesh with a branch and cooked the sizzling meat over the fire.

"I'm just barely holdin' back. I can't live on nothin' but leaves, but even though raw meat makes me drool, it makes me want to vomit at the same time. That's why I'm bad at fightin' rough. I want ta avoid killin' if I can help it."

"What kinda bestial warrior doesn't like killin'?"

"You 'n I are different in that I'm not in this body 'cause I want ta be. I'm stuck with this way of livin', so all I can do is make the best of what I've got. But even when we hold ourselves back, fallen beasts'll always end up leavin' a trail of bodies."

It didn't matter if I wanted to or not. To borrow Zero's words, it was an intractable truth.

I sprinkled salt over the meat. The fire popped and glowed yellow.

Thinking back to Zero's impatience, I looked over at Albus.

"—Save Zero...right?" I murmured. Albus stirred, and her eyes opened but slightly.

"A...uh..."

"Little lady!" Dog-face exclaimed, peering into Albus' face.

*Idiot, don't do that just as she's wakin' up. We look like wild animals right now.*

"W—aaaaaah!"

Sure enough, Albus screamed and punched dog-face in the mug, fleeing behind my back as if to escape the clutches of a monster.

“Why, little lady... I can’t believe when you saw me, someone who took care of you for all those years, you screamed and went for my bro, who I’ve known only since yesterday...”

“How was I supposed to know?! I can’t tell that it’s you on sight since you don’t have fur anymore!”

Wolfing down the rabbit flesh, Albus replied bluntly to dog-face.

Albus was sitting in my lap. She’d complained about being cold and grumbled about how it wasn’t fair that I had fur, and so we ended up like this.

Dog-face was glaring at me bitterly, but I wasn’t enjoying this anymore than he was.

“Plus, I was with mercenary recently, and I saw him at the square too.”

“What? W-wait little lady! What about me?!”

“Hm? Were you there?”

Dog-face slumped, seemingly heartbroken. He looked so pitiful, I decided to send him a lifeboat.

“The one that jumped in the burning straw, cut the ropes tying you to the pole, and saved ya from the explosion was this guy, ya know?”

*Oh*, Albus acknowledged quietly, looking at dog-face’s bandaged body.

“Besides, if he didn’t rush in ta save ya, I don’t know if I would’ve.”

I was indeed significantly motivated by dog-face’s actions. When I told Albus this, she gave dog-face a slightly guilty look, but immediately took on an unconciliatory attitude, like a spoiled child.

“It’s not like I asked you to save me...I didn’t really care if I died either way!”

“No, little lady! How could I face Solena again if I let you die?!”

“Grandma’s already dead, so you can live as you like!”

“Little lady...”

Dog-face’s ears weakly flopped down. This was a completely different dog-face from the dog-face who had had women wait on him at the inn.

“Don’t ya think it’s kinda rude ta say that you didn’t care whether you died or not after he’d saved you from gettin’ burned to death?”

“I wasn’t scared of a little thing like that!”

“Humans who’re immolated clench their teeth from their pain and fear, and those teeth then dig into their gums and shatter.”

*Gulp*, a small noise of fear leaked from Albus’ throat.

“Didja think that you’d get burned and die in an instant? First the heat would cook your windpipe and lungs, so you can’t breathe. Next would be your eyes. All of your weak spots’d get baked one by one. Your skin’d sizzle and split as it burned, and those newly exposed bits’d get seared by the fire too. You’d be lucky if you passed out, but if you didn’t, you’d struggle and suffer agony ‘till the moment you die. You’d scream, squirm and fracture your bones—“

“Stop, that’s enough!” Dog-face yelled. *Give her some sympathy*, his expression seemed to be saying, and I realized my slip of the tongue.

It was how Albus’ last surviving family member had died.

“My bad...I shouldn’t ‘ve said all that...”

“No...it’s fine. I’m alright,” Albus said, biting her lip. Her face was drained of color, her eyes were glistening and wavering, but she was just barely able to contain her tears. I admired Albus’ willpower. Her bravery and steadfastness were surely stronger than mine by far.

But even if it was in resistance against Thirteenth, it was a bit much.

“...Just what happened in the dungeon? You knew that goin’ against Thirteenth meant you’d be immolated, right?”

That Albus had found out something in the dungeon and rebelled against Thirteenth’s wishes was incontrovertible. When I asked her, Albus simply weakly shook her head.

“I had no other choice...’that person’ stole Zero’s book and killed all of Zero’s companions. I couldn’t go back to the Coven of Zero that ‘that person’ created, nor did I want to. But, Thirteenth is a pretty shitty man too!”

“That’s the thing, why do ya think that? He’s tryin’ ta clean up the mess the Book of Zero caused. He’s tryin’ ta protect Zero’s name from more harm.”

“That might be true...but all he cares about is *that*! He doesn’t care if all the witches in Wenias die, so long as he gets what he wants!”

“Thirteenth told me to lead the Coven of Zero into a trap. He said it was time to end the fighting... he would lay the trap, and then I was to lure everyone there. Thirteenth knew I was representing

‘that person’ as Solena’s granddaughter. That’s why he pulled that ploy at the academy: he was waiting for me to show myself.”

The conflict would then end, and when that happened—

I thought back to what Thirteenth had said to Zero. He saw the conclusion of the yearlong war, which was to be achieved through the demise of every witch in this kingdom.

“Thirteenth would use me to destroy the Coven of Zero, the wayward sorcerers—any and all witches who knew magic, because leaving the rampaging witches to their ways would continue to damage Zero’s name, or so he said...but that’s not right! Sure, there are witches who cause chaos, but there are also lots of witches who are fighting to be able to live peacefully, and witches who use magic in the way it was meant to be used...and just because he can’t tell them apart, Thirteenth would kill them all!”

“Yeah...maybe so,” I answered vaguely.

“It’s true!” Albus answered, indignant. “If he had told me to tell the Coven of Zero the truth about ‘that person’, and convince them to stop fighting, I would’ve helped. It figures that we should combine our power and get rid of just the wayward sorcerers, right? But Thirteenth said that wouldn’t work. That’s why I...”

Why she chose to burn at the stake, and gave a rallying cry to her comrades.

If Albus hadn’t done so, then there would simply be a one-sided slaughter by Thirteenth of the witches.

When Solena’s granddaughter, Albus, had shouted to “defeat Thirteenth for the sake of peace,” I doubt that there was a single person there whose heart was not the least bit moved. There was now a high likelihood that those witches “skilled in sorcery and possessed of power,” who had chosen to watch but not take action, would set out to overthrow Thirteenth.

If they were to join forces, even temporarily, with the Coven of Zero, I doubt that even Thirteenth could weather their assault without injury. Albus had sought that alliance.

“To start off, everyone will come together to defeat Thirteenth. Afterward, we would mop up the wayward sorcerers. And once we were done with that, we would request that the king put an end to the witch hunts, since we would have gotten rid of all the evildoing witches. From there on we would find and capture ‘that person’, and let Zero do whatever she wants with them.

“Good idea, right?” Albus appealed.

“Possibly,” I once again gave a nebulous answer. It just wasn’t going to be as simple as Albus described.

I understood Albus' opposition toward Thirteenth, but to stop an explosively spreading art and its misuse would require the perfect governance of the people who used it, because otherwise there would be no choice but to kill them.

And Thirteenth had chosen to gather up all the magic users and slaughter them.

If Thirteenth, while enacting his murderous plan, were to clash with all the witches of the land, that would cause disorder utterly incomparable to anything history had ever seen.

## Part 2

Civil war would throw the kingdom into chaos, as everyone knew how to hit where it hurt. Internal conflict wasn't something that could be kept out besides, and so the situation would deteriorate into an unrecoverable state, with neighbor suspecting neighbor.

Even though Albus had laid out his plans to end the war, there was no guarantee that things would go accordingly.

The one who betrayed his comrades but nevertheless wanted to stop the fighting—Thirteenth.

The one who, to bring about a witches' era, shattered peace and killed others to steal a secret technique—'That person'.

And the one who dreams of an ideal and peaceful resolution to the conflict—Albus.

If I had to cast my lot with one of them, I would choose Thirteenth. My opinion hadn't changed, despite how filthy Thirteenth's methods were. Not that it meant much coming from the person who'd stolen Albus away from Thirteenth's clutches, but...

"I know it's a pipe dream."

"—Wha?"

Albus muttered out of nowhere, hugging her knees.

"I'm Solena's grandchild...but that's it. I'm still in the process of learning sorcery, and I can't even perform the Beastgranting ritual. Thirteenth's incredible...to be honest. He managed to get to where he is now in just one year. He earned the king's trust on his own, and fought all the witches on his own. I've heard that Thirteenth's even teaching people in the castle to use magic. But the difference is, Thirteenth would never create wayward sorcerers. There's no way someone like myself could defeat Thirteenth..."

Thirteenth fought alone, and Albus had the power of the Coven of Zero.

Theirs were different cases, Albus was saying. Though Albus kept floundering about and wishing for an ideal situation, she didn't have the power to make her dreams into reality.

Albus was being cornered by both Thirteenth and that which was called reality.

If Albus was as powerful as Thirteenth, then the situation would most likely be different. But no matter if one wished for or did not wish for something—things would stay as they were.

Even so, Albus wouldn't give up. Compared with her lack of strength, Albus's heart was exceedingly steadfast.

"Come here, Holdem."

Albus beckoned at dog-face. *Holdem*—was that dog-face's name? Well, even though I knew his name now, I didn't really have a reason to call him by it.

"Show me your back."

Albus slipped off my lap, and crouched near dog-face's back. She breathed a small sigh as if to calm herself.

"Iia, do, kuuha—Blood, restore this missing flesh!"

The surrounding air became immediately warm. Lukewarm light gathered around Albus' hands, dancing around them. It must be magic, I observed, but much gentler than the likes of Staim and Flagis. It seemed that it would feel pleasant to the touch.

"The Book of Safeguarding, verse one: «Codia». Sanction this; my name is Albus."

When Albus touched dog-face's back, the light was sucked into his body.

*Huh*, I let out a noise of surprise.

The smell of blood—more specifically, the smell of burnt flesh—disappeared.

Dog-face blinked, and when he went to unwrap his bandages, his back had been completely healed from its appearance of an overripe fruit.

"Little lady, this—"

"It's magic. The Book of Protection—magic for healing wounds and protecting people. I like the magic of this book the most, and it's my strong point. I can use pretty advanced magic from this book, you know?"

"There're four books, Hunting, Capturing, Harvesting, and Safeguarding, yeah?"

"You know a lot about it, mercenary."

"Cause I heard all this from the one who wrote it."

*Right*, Albus laughed bitterly.

“Zero actually...she actually wrote the book for it to be used like this. For it to be helpful to people. I’ve read the Book of Zero, but stuff like making it easy to hunt, stuff you use to get fruits from high places; I thought it was strangely written...it’s funny how useful Flagis is to burn only what you want to burn. It’s like you can hunt and cook at the same time. Two birds with one stone.”

In my mind’s eye, I saw Zero laughing as she wrote the Book of Zero.

“Magic to give kids who have nightmares a good night’s sleep. Magic to catch robbers when they sneak in. Zero wrote it for those purposes—but no one uses magic like Zero’d meant it to be.”

Just how did Zero feel when someone went to her cave and killed all of her companions, just for a book that she had written to be of benefit to others? Was she sad? Or perhaps bitter?

I would think she cried. For all of ten years—there was no one to hear her weep.

“Everything’d be so simple if magic didn’t exist.”

Techniques meant to be convenient had sown the embers of war. Those embers had become an inferno, and many witches and humans were dying as a result of it. I didn’t think Zero was the kind of benevolent person who would take possibilities like these into account. She was a cold witch. But she had, in all seriousness, admitted that she “should not have written that book”.

I had indeed heard pain in her words when she said so.

“Are you saying to wipe out all witches? You hate witches, dontcha?”

“I ain’t sayin’ anythin’ of the sort. If we didn’t have magic in the first place, then all ‘em idiots causin’ chaos wouldn’t exist, and neither would Thirteenth’s purgin’. Basically, Thirteenth wouldn’t have a bunch of magic users causin’ trouble under Zero’s name ta worry about.”

“Sure, you can say that, but there’s nothing to do about it. At this point—“

Albus’ head shot up.

“...Get rid of magic?”

“Yeah. Not witches, but the root of it all, magic. If ya did that, ya wouldn’t need ta kill witches anymore. If they couldn’t use magic anymore, those witches who’d learned magic from the Coven of Zero would just go back ta bein’ normal people. If only the Lunar Chant faction’s sorcery got used in the first place, then there wouldn’t be a war right now. What I’m sayin’ is if we could go back ta before they got their hands on the Book of Zero. Well, it’s only if that’s possible anyway—“

“It’s possible.”

“—Huh?”

"It's possible! We can get rid of magic without having to kill any witches!" Shouting, Albus leapt at me and began shaking me by the shoulders.

"W-wait, wait, stop shakin' me!"

"Look, remember when Zero used Rejection on my magic when we first met?"

"Well...yeah, she did. I remember."

"All of the Book of Zero's magic is under the control of high-ranking demons Zero's summoned, since they borrow from the powers of lower-ranking demons. That's why if Zero was to have these high-ranking demons Reject magic used by the witches of Wenias, then no one'd be able to use what's written in the Book of Zero anymore! Just like that, magic'd vanish everywhere!"

"J...just like that?"

"Yep. Just like that. The concept of "using sorcery without summoning demons" wouldn't disappear just because the magic in the Book of Zero is rendered unusable. If a fork breaks and you know how to make one, then you could just make a new fork, right? Essentially, if someone were to make a new form of magic, you could just use that."

"Then there's no point, is there?"

"There is! At least we can get all of the inexperienced wayward sorcerers with one blow. For people like them, who hadn't learned sorcery, making a new form of magic would be impossible."

"Alright then..."

"And these confused, magic-less witches will seek a new leader. A leader who can let them use magic again. That's where I come in! I couldn't do something like bringing about magic, but I would seem extraordinary enough to trick those novice witches. Besides, I *am* the great Solena's granddaughter!"

When she put it like that, it really did seem possible. Albus, as the granddaughter of the most renowned witch in this kingdom, surely knew lots about sorcery. With dog-face as her guard, the naïve novice witches would be happy to recognize Albus as their leader. This kid meant to cause confusion, and then ride the resulting chaos to a place of influence. She'd be a frightening witch in the future.

But.

"Can it be done? It's impossible to go around 'n use Rejection on every witch in the kingdom."

If it wasn't, Zero'd have done so a long time ago.

"That's why we don't do it person by person, but on the land itself," Albus explained, picking up a tree branch and drawing numerous small circles on the ground. Those small circles were witches, I supposed. And finally, a larger circle was drawn which encircled the smaller ones.

"We use demonic seals to construct a large bounded field and every witch inside the field will be made unable to use magic from the Book of Zero. Zero can't do it alone, but with my help we should be able to! Thirteenth put a bounded field around my witch burning back there to suppress any witches too."

*Was that so?* I had wondered why there wasn't any magical retaliation. If magic could be used in that area, then of course the Coven of Zero wouldn't let Albus be killed before their very eyes. The only one to use magic was Thirteenth, but that was because he himself set up the field.

"We learned magic for the power to fight, but if we get rid of the flames of war then there'd be no need for power. Even returning to the farce of coexistence would be way better than the conflict going on right now. I'm still just a kid, but I'm also directly descended from a witch of the Lunar Chant. I won't lose to anyone in anything involving seals. Not even in sealing magic within the earth!"

"So basically...you're gonna draw a huge magic circle 'round all of Wenias?"

"Yeah. By putting together many magic circles, I can combine them into one big magic circle. There's a bit of accuracy involved, but it isn't that difficult."

Right. At least, I didn't think it was possible. Zero'd told me how flawlessly magic circles needed to be drawn.

"Then, Zero'd tell the demons to "Reject the use of magic on this land," and I'd seal that declaration into the magic circle. At the very least, the demons forming the basis of the Book of Zero's magic won't respond to attempts at using magic within the field. That's why—"

Albus' sunny demeanor quickly turned to gloom.

"we need Zero..."

"...Well, that's it then."

There were ranks of demons. Rejection was like having the high-ranking demons order the lower-ranking ones to "stop lending humans your strength". The one with the power to have those high-ranking demons do so was Zero.

Without Zero, there wasn't anything we could do.

"The problem is, Thirteenth's got Zero locked up..."

"Thirteenth's got Zero locked up, eh?!" I exclaimed in a hysteric tone. That was why Albus had told me to 'save Zero'.

“It was the night I was imprisoned by Thirteenth. I was in the dungeon, and Thirteenth was telling me to work for him. That’s when Zero came—and she was really angry. She said something like ‘so you stole away my mercenary, hm?’”

I pursed my lips. This was after I had left the castle.

“And that Thirteenth had betrayed her. Zero looked ready to kill him. But just then, Zero coughed up blood and collapsed.”

“What?! Did Thirteenth actually get her?!”

*Probably*, Albus nodded. Probably or not, there wasn’t any other interpretation of events.

“Thirteenth got mad too, and said ‘you were foolish, weren’t you? You shouldn’t have left the cave. Going outside and getting involved with the likes of that mercenary is why you now suffer the burden of such a wound.’...”

Albus glanced at me. *It’s better not to look, kid. I’m a jaded warrior of hundreds of battles, but my face has got to be looking petrifyingly scared right now..*

“Zero lost consciousness then, and was taken somewhere else...”

“—Is she okay?”

“I don’t think she’s dead. I could feel her magic.”

“Uh, just a sec...little lady? Big bro? You guys lost me a while back...”

Albus and I turned to look at dog-face at the same time. We had completely forgotten that he existed. For dog-face, who didn’t know how things led up to where they were now, this had to be extremely confusing. So—

“Isn’t Zero big bro’s name?”

He just revealed a dreadnaught-class misunderstanding.

“When I was runnin’ away with little lady, I heard Thirteenth yell somethin’ about Zero, so I wondered if it was big bro’s name or little lady’s alias or somethin’...”

“This kid’s alias is Albus. Zero’s the devastatin’ beauty who taught you a lesson that time.”

“T-that one. She was a great one. I wanna get a taste ‘a her—“

Before I could give dog-face’s daydreaming face a good wallop, Albus had already done so. *Gah*, dog-face yelled, claspings his face in pain. *Nice job, Albus*.

“But...why did Thirteenth say that then?”

“—That?”

“Stop, hold your fire! —You’ll hit Zero!”

My eyes went wide open. —Thirteenth had said that. But Zero shouldn’t have been there, so there was no way their shooting could hit Zero. I frowned and turned to Albus.

“What’s this mean? Why would shootin’ at us cause Zero ta get hit?”

“I dunno about that. I was basically unconscious, after all.”

“I didn’t see anyone but little lady.”

*How useless are these two?! But—it isn’t like I’m any better.*

## Part 3

“At any rate—“

I poked my head out of the cavern, and saw the indigo-stained sky of twilight.

“First, we have ta get the witch back, or there won’t be any point in plannin’ anythin’ else. This ain’t the case of a damsel in distress, but where in the castle would that woman be locked up? ...”

“She wasn’t in the dungeons. I was in there all the way up until my witch burning, and there wasn’t any indication that Zero was there too.”

“Then she’s probably in a tower. It’s pretty standard ta lock up prisoners in the dungeons, ’n nobles in the towers.

“Is Zero a noble?”

“How did Thirteenth treat that witch when she fell?”

*Um...* Albus tilted her head.

“...He picked her up like she was a noblewoman!”

“That’s too much info. I feel like my last meal’s comin’ back up. But at least that means Thirteenth doesn’t see Zero as someone ta drag ta the dungeons by the hair.”

But this was the problem.

“Towers’re basically used for vision—and for keepin’ people confined. If it’s bein’ used for vision, then there’ll be troops wanderin’ around, and if it’s bein’ used for confinement, it’s pretty likely gonna have a hidden entrance. In other words, it’s hard ta attack.”

“Wow. You do know a lot about this.”

“Fallen beasts’re generally the front lines for armies attackin’ a fort. If ya count up all of ‘em, the number of times I’ve been part of a siege is in the double digits.”

“Of course that’s nothin’ for big bro! You’re like a demon in the flesh! A warmonger!”

“I ain’t like you, ya bastard!”

Dog-face put his hands over his head and shrank back as I yelled. *You’re all dog, ain’tcha, ya dog-faced wolf?* He acted like a sleazebag at the inn, but with Albus grabbin’ his collar, he was pretty mature.

*I really don’t wanna be like that*, I thought somewhat seriously.

“But big bro, there’re four towers in that castle, so ya don’t know which one she might be in. Besides, she might not be in a tower, but some other place.”

I inclined my head. I didn’t think there were any other places to imprison people besides the towers and dungeons, though—

“Like, she could be somewhere like Thirteenth’s bedroom—“

I froze. Albus’s mouth was agape, and she was flushing red and turning pale.

Thirteenth—and Zero?

Could it be? But Thirteenth was a man and Zero was a woman, Thirteenth was unattractive and Zero was good looking, they were both comrades, which meant the chance that—

No, no way. I wanted to believe that we couldn’t conclude anything yet.

“He...wouldn’t do somethin’ like that...to a woman who’d just fallen ’n puked blood...right...”

“Thirteenth might’ve put her in his bed ta look after her ’cause she’d fallen ’n puked blood, hm? Since Zero’s a special witch ta Thirteenth.”

*Oooh, that’s what he meant. I got worked up over nothing.*

“Work on yer phrasin’, ya sex maniac.”

“‘Sex maniac’...I do like my women, but...one sec there, little lady. Could ya hide yer disgust? I’m a bit hurt.”

It was true that she might be held in a normal, but still barred, room.

“Hey kid—I mean, lady.”

“Kid is fine at this point. After pretending to be a guy for a year, I’ve gotten used to the rougher language.”

“‘S that so...”

“That is so. So, what?”

“Can ya find out where they’re keepin’ Zero? You said ya wanted ta open up a fortune teller’s, so you’re good at divination, right?”

I hadn’t forgotten that Albus said she wanted to open a fortune telling shop in La Tête, which meant divination should be this witch’s true strength. However, Albus wore a sour look.

“I mean, I can...but I need something deeply connected with the person whose location I’m trying to divine. Something a part of them—like a hair, or a blanket they use, clothing. I can’t just divine them like *bang* and it’s done, ‘cause this isn’t some pre-rehearsed magic show.”

Of course, we didn’t have anything meaningful of Zero’s, nor had we done anything as distasteful as gathering samples of Zero’s hair. Zero hadn’t had much in the way of belongings in the first place. She’d just gotten her clothes in Foamicaum—

“Ah!”

“Aaah!”

Albus and I cried at the same time, and our gazes met.

“Zero’s robes—“

“—are in the thrift shop in Foamicaum! That man’s gotta have it framed by now!”

Under the cloak of night, we crept out of the riverside cave and made for the thrift shop at Foamicaum.

It seemed that we had been swept far downstream, as when I checked, our location was very close to Foamicaum. Even while skirting the roads and following trails left by animals, we arrived at our destination while the moon was still low in the sky.

Even so.

Based on the likelihood that wanted posters were already out for us after our fiasco at the plaza, it was impossible for us to brazenly enter Foamicaum under broad daylight.

That meant we had to make our way into a town whose gates had been closed for quite some time.

Well, we were two fallen beasts and one witch. We could make it through anything.

With that in mind, we made it safely into Foamicaum after much struggling.

And as Albus had predicted, the thrift shop's owner really had framed Zero's robes.

With a golden frame and a protective pane of glass, this was treatment worthy of the royal jewels. Sitting on a chair before a table in front of Zero's robes, the shopkeeper was appreciating them as if he were hearing an angelic chorus. Two fallen beasts and a witch broke into that scene. The shopkeeper's surprise and confusion were terrible indeed.

To put it into perspective, it was surprise and confusion the likes of which caused him to send his chair and table toppling to the floor, and spill some tasteful wine on his head.

"T-the hell do ya want?! Why'd ya come here?!" The shopkeeper yelled in a shrill voice. I tossed him a bag filled with coins.

"Sorry 'bout that ol' man, here's the money for that robe you bought from us, so we'd appreciate it if you gave it back."

Without waiting for the dazed shopkeeper's permission, I shattered the glass of the enclosure, and tossed the robe to Albus. The shopkeeper gave a pitiful cry as I did so.

"Stop! If you take that from me, where'm I gonna find the nourishment ta keep myself alive then?! No, wait, wait, please! You can have anything you want! Just don't take those robes away!"

His voice harbored grief no one but a mother watching her child be killed could know. It was heartbreaking, but I ignored him.

"Don't you feel bad for him?"

"Then how 'bout ya give him yer underwear?"

When I finished my sentence, Albus grabbed my tail and yanked. I couldn't bear the pain and yelled, glaring at Albus as I collapsed.

"What d'ya think you're doin'? It's taboo ta attack a fallen beast's tail!"

"I know, I've done the same to Holdem. —Sir, if you give us the robe, we'll have Zero give you her socks. How does that sound?"

"S...socks...you say?!"

The shopkeeper stopped breathing for a second, working over the word *socks* in his mouth. He took it as if it were a divine revelation, but there was no divinity nor holiness in it.

"You're sure? She'll give me her socks? She'll let me watch her take 'em off?"

His eyes indicated that he was serious. I was a bit taken aback. So it seemed, was Albus.

"Hey, do we really need ta show him this much pity?"

"I'm regretting this too..."

“Little lady, we’re ready for the ritual.”

## Part 4

Dog-face was calling Albus over to a small circle he had drawn, just wide enough for a person to stand in, that circumscribed a complex pattern of intertwined glyphs and numerals. The shopkeeper seemed satisfied by the promise of Zero’s socks, repeatedly asking Albus, “when is she coming?” Pushing him aside, Albus and I approached dog-face.

“You really can draw magic circles, eh?”

“Just so ya know, my fifteen years as a witch’s servant weren’t just for show.”

“Alright. Go ahead, kid.”

“Mhm.”

Albus stood in the center of the magic circle, with Zero’s robes at her feet and a candle in her hands. At that moment, the pervert snapped out of his trance of Zero’s socks, turning pale.

“Wait, what’re you planning on doing? Put that flame out, ya hear?! No—no, don’t do it!”

“Calm down, pops. We’ll be careful with the fire—“

“Don’t burn those robes! That’d just be cruel!”

The shopkeeper overrode dog-face’s pacifying voice with a shout. *It’s not up to you*, I silently retorted, with the feeling that I wasn’t the only one thinking so. We shouldn’t have shown this pervert any clemency.

The shopkeeper made as to grab at Albus, so I held him down, stopping his movements. Ignoring the tantrum he was throwing, I nodded at Albus.

*Sorry, ol’ man. But it was your choice ta give us the robes because ya wanted her socks.*

*And we’re free ta do what we want with ‘em since they’re not yours anymore, yeah?*

“—Do it.”

Albus took a deep breath—and dropped the flaming candle onto Zero’s robes.

A dark room. Candlelight. Birdsong. Stone walls. The stench of blood.

We had exchanged the thrift store shopkeeper's sustenance for all this. This was what Albus' divination had gotten us. So the results of a divination were fundamentally very fuzzy and vague things.

Divination was also a form of sorcery, and though I had heard that it took the summoning of a demon to perform, I could neither see the figure nor hear the sounds of a demon.

"Little lady summoned a demon into her own body. Not the demon's whole body, mind you, just its soul. It's called 'speakin' with the dead' and 'demon invocation', but it's the oldest, most basic type of sorcery."

Dog-face attempted to explain, but I couldn't see past how Albus stood stiffly in the middle of her magic circle, wearing a blank expression and murmuring to herself.

"So, where would ya say the witch is at?"

"Seems to be the Daybreak Tower. It's the tower closest to where the sun rises in the mornings. Birds made a nest there in the past, 'n every time it gets ta this time of year, the birds return."

"You got confidence in that answer? Sir former knight of the castle?"

"Nah. It's been fifteen years since I've been in that place."

"So we're still gamblin' huh..."

We could hear the breeze and birdsong, which meant it was a quiet place.

Places of quiet would be limited in a castle with plenty of foot traffic, meaning that Thirteenth could not have imprisoned Zero near the royal quarters.

Besides, he himself lived in the basement of the castle. But since there were the sounds of birds, Zero could not be underground. So, probably in a tower. When I told Albus about my findings, she very insightfully offered that "the results of a divination do require proper analysis to be made clear," with a very sorcerer-like expression.

And so, I left Foamicaum in the dead of night and headed for Prasta, the imperial capital.

Taking a wide path around Prasta's walls, I ended up at the foot of the cliff jutting out from behind the castle. It sounds quite simple, but of course I ran here at full speed. I had to get this done at night, as the stroke of dawn would bring increased alertness to the city. As for any operation, speed and accuracy were what would bring victory.

"Well then...'bout time ta infiltrate the castle."

Prasta was based around the clifftop castle, with the rest of the city forming a fan shape down the gentle slopes. The king's castle was built atop a precipitous cliff, with no ground behind the fortress.

In addition, at the bottom of the cliff upon which the castle rested, was a fast-flowing river serving as a natural moat.

This meant that there were three obstacles on my way to the castle. The first was the rapids of the river before me. The second was the sheer cliffside past the river, leading up to the castle. The third was the fortress walls surely with patrolling soldiers upon them. If I were a human I would give up immediately upon hearing of these challenges. This would be an extremely difficult endeavor. I really did not want to, but I had to do it.

Breathing a single sigh and gathering up my fighting spirit, I leapt into the rapid flow of water. Swimming against the current and toward the opposite shore, I sank a knife into the riverbank to stop myself from being swept away. I crept up a narrow foothold along the bank and made it to shore. I had passed the first challenge.

Pressing myself against the cliff holding up the castle, I could gauge the height of the castle, and even higher up, the soaring tower that I was heading toward.

“Oh...that’s really far up.”

I could see the rough veins of rock on the cliff and the chiseled stone of the castle walls. And even further beyond, made difficult to see by the moonlight’s glare, was the tower’s peak looking like the needle of a timepiece.

“Shit, how could that Dog-Face be so calm—“

—*Big bro can get up there no problem, yeah?*

—Get up...no...

—A cliff.

He had said that this was the only way to reach the tower from the outside.

I had said goodbye to Albus and Dog-Face at the thrift shop. Those two had preparations to do for the bounded field, and I couldn’t help with that. Albus had donned a wig and a dress, assuming the looks of a woman, to throw off their pursuers. My job was to secure Zero. Was she really being kept in this tower?

“Please, Albus—Witch of the Lunar Chant.”

I drew the hood of my beloved black cloak over my head, and at the same time gripped two knives in my hands before thrusting them into the earthen cliff. I hoisted myself up by one, and stabbed the other into a higher location on the incline.

## Part 5

The heart of the kingdom was its capital. If it were to fall, then the rest of the country would soon follow. This was why, even though the capital employed no more guards than a normal town would, thanks to the cliff serving as a natural rearguard, they were all deployed to the front of the city to defend from attack. So even if there were soldiers temporarily stationed here in the back, they would most likely be lax in their patrolling.

Of course they would be, as there wasn't anyone alive stupid enough to climb this cliff with two knives, and anyone who attempted to would lose their grip due to exhaustion and fall to the ground far below. But, a fallen beast mercenary would have sufficient strength to make it up without dying.

Still, even a fallen beast wouldn't do something this suicidal—

I had confidence that I could get all the way up, but death was certain if my hand slipped from fatigue or discomfort.

Halfway up the cliff, I was dripping with sweat. What was strange was how I was freezing from my dip in the river, yet sweating at the same time.

On top of that, my drenched body would only get colder every time the wind blew past, the warmth in my limbs being slowly leached away. As that happened, the feeling in my fingers grew duller and duller, which was a very bad sign. I readjusted my grip on the knives.

"This ain't somethin' a heavyweight like me should be doin'...shit, maybe I should lose some weight?"

I extracted one of the knives from the compact earth—it was closer to stone, actually—and thrust it in once again. I dangled by one hand for a while, resting my other arm, when I couldn't help but look down.

"Oh—I'm real high up..."

I had imagined what it would be like up here, but looking down now, it was very much the real deal. Falling meant dying. I had no other choice but to keep going. It seemed easier for me to keep up my progress rather than turn back the way I came. These thoughts occupying my mind, I lodged my foot in a crevice on the cliff, reached as far as I could and sank my knife in the dirt, repeating this routine over and over again.

Seriously—it was taking effort beyond my imagining to get back the job I'd lost. I'd met Zero when I fell off a small cliff, and now I was climbing up an actual cliff to get back to her.

Well, even so, it was still my fault for doubting her.

*Clang*, I felt my knife bounce off something. It was the foundation of the castle. I looked up, and saw the walls of the citadel rise solemnly beyond the cliff's edge.

I couldn't use my knives past this point. I instead used my claws, digging them into the soft mortar between the stones of the wall.

I felt chills the moment I put the full weight of my body on them. They felt far less solid than the knives.

“—Don't give out on me now, claws of mine.”

Praying, I began scaling the ramparts. Pushing my claws into the mortar and finding footholds in the few faults in the wall, I made my way up inch by inch. As I got higher and higher, the wind became stronger and stronger, and I felt more and more as if I would be blown straight off. There were small windows in the towers, though since a human's head could barely fit through them, they weren't very useful for an intruder. It seemed like had taken some precautions, more or less. I tilted my head back and looked up.

*Just...a bit further—*

But as that thought crossed my mind, I heard the sound of footsteps from the window next to me.

I had nowhere to run to if I were seen, and of course no way to talk my way out of this mess. Something like “It was just such a beautiful night out that I couldn't resist a climb up the castle walls” would probably just earn me a laugh and an “Ah, then may I join you?”

I paused my breathing, and prayed to God that the footsteps would pass by uneventfully.

But *God* was an uncaring fellow. The moon's position was very bad news for me.

My shadow fell—right in the middle of the window. *Any less sympathy and you'd be the devil, God.*

“Shit—“

I cursed under my breath, and reached my arm out parallel to the ground to position myself directly above the window.

*—Don't look up, please.*

I waited with bated breath as I kept a careful watch on the window below me. The footsteps stopped before the opening. After a few seconds, however, the heavy footsteps set off again and faded away.

All the exhaustion of the climb suddenly hit me all at once. When it did—the mortar crumbled, and my claws left the castle wall.

“F—Fuck!”

I was falling. I clawed at the wall, but my claws merely scratched the stone surface, not doing a thing to stop my fall. A few of my nails broke from the shock, and blood began to drip from my fingers.

My desperately outstretched arm caught the bottom ledge of the tiny window opening. The impact with the wall nearly dislocated my shoulder, though I was somehow able to bear the agony and refrain from crying out from the excruciating pain.

“T—that was way too close...! I was aboutta die...!”

My claws were messed up. Inching my way up was far more difficult now, but I needed to keep going, otherwise I was going to die for real. I started up the ramparts once more.

## Part 6

At last, I neared the tower’s peak. I reached out toward the ledge of a window far larger than those I had passed, and carefully hoisted myself up. There was an iron plate hammered into the stone frame that obfuscated the tower’s innards.

In the darkness, only candles—wasn’t it?

Resting on the windowsill, I looked around the outside of the tower. —There was a bird’s nest perched there. *It looks like I’ve hit the jackpot.* I tried working some feeling back into my numb hands by clenching and unclenching them, then clambered onto the gently sloping roof of the spire. The roof’s shingles were well-worn from wind and rain. Stripping them away, I tapped lightly on the base of the roof. It seemed fragile, perfect for what I had in mind.

If there was any benefit to being born a fallen beast, it would be our exceptional physical prowess. Were I to run at full speed, no man could match me, and one punch with all my might could turn a tree into splinters. As for brittle stone—well, I supposed that was within my limits.

“One, two—three!”

Clenching my hand into a steel-like fist, I smashed it into the roof’s base with all the strength I could muster. I must have overestimated the sturdiness of the roof, as that single punch made it unable to support my weight any longer.

“Shit, it’s fall—”

Before I could finish, I fell into the tower, accompanied by a shower of shingles and dirt.

“—Aaagh...!”

I somehow managed to contain a scream, though I still was nowhere near a presentable state. Gradually clawing my way out of a heap of rubble, I gazed up at the gaping hole in the ceiling.

“Hey witch! I’m here—”

As I tried to get up, I saw in front of me a beautiful face that filled me with trepidation.

—*to save ya*. The words died in my throat.

Zero was looking down at me with a strange expression akin to holding back laughter yet being on the verge of tears. Just a moment later, however, a stiff look washed out her features.

“...H-hello there...?”

In the blink of an eye, Zero gripped my face with a force incommensurate with her appearance that I had come to expect. As she forced my head upward, I felt like I understood the plight of maidens who were roughed up by ruffians.

“Why are you here?”

“—Huh?”

“I am asking you why you came here—you fool!”

“A—argh!”

She rammed herself headlong into me. Falling hadn’t been enough to make me cry out, but this was. As it was so unexpected, I hadn’t even the time to brace myself for the impact.

“What the heck was that for?! Can’t ya tell I’m here ta rescue ya?!”

“What rescue—it’s clear now! Who asked you to? Just who hired you to do this? Why do you not understand that you were hoodwinked?! Return from whence you came this instant! This is a trap set by Thirteenth!”

“Return from whence I came...it ain’t that simple. You saw how I fell through the roof, didntcha?! I ain’t here ‘cause someone asked me to be, nor ‘cause someone hired me to! What’re ya on about this bein’ a trap anyway?! So what if I’m caught in it?! Ain’t Albus the target here?!”

“I need not explain that to you, just know that your help is unwanted. If you arrived here by scaling the walls, then take your leave that way! After all, you are no longer my mercenary.”

As if spitting out the words, she shoved me away. I went from a sitting position to half-standing and glared at her.

“Yeah, that’s right! And it’s all thanks ta how your *comrade* Thirteenth tricked me! That’s why I came back though—to apologize. I climbed an endless cliff with nothing but two knives to get here! My precious claws got all messed up!”

I showed Zero my mutilated fingertips dripping with crimson blood, wincing quietly. But Zero refused to acknowledge them and remained as stoic as ever.

“It may indeed have been the fault of Thirteenth as you were under the influence of sorcery at the time. However—the cause lay within. You were afraid of me. All Thirteenth did was fan your doubts and fears!”

“That’s exactly what happened! I was scared and doubtful. But how else could I’ve felt?! It’s pointless ta tell me not to be scared of witches, and tellin’ a mercenary not ta distrust others is like tellin’ ‘em ta die! Even then, I still went and climbed a wall just ta get back to ya! Won’t ya think on it ‘n perhaps toss me just a little bone, O master of mine?!”

I’d been reduced to begging her to take me back in. Still, I possessed the willpower to prostrate myself at her feet and plead forgiveness. No, rather I had, but—

—Could she even be convinced?

Zero’s face was stony, and I could feel the hatred in her gaze as she stared down at me. It seemed that Zero had abandoned me utterly and completely. It wasn’t like I was unprepared for this possibility, as I could bear it. —But I had come all this way. At the very least, I had an obligation to take her to see Albus.

“Alright...I get it...I’m sorry. There’s somethin’ important I gotta tell ya though—”

*Plink*, a drop of warm water splashed onto my hand. Thinking it was rain, I raised my meekly downturned eyes toward the sky. And then, I realized that I was mistaken.

Zero stood before me. Her expression was still impossibly frigid, and I could still sense in her amethyst eyes the hate she felt for me. However, liquid was flowing from them drop after drop. They traced lines down her cheeks and jaw, falling pitter-patter on my hand.

For a short while, it didn’t register with me that those drops of liquid were tears.

“In what state...do you think I let you go?”

“Wh...at...”

“In what state...do you think I let you leave? Just how frustrating do you think it was to have Thirteenth steal you away from me?! It was trivial to keep you by my side, but as you disliked witches and feared even me...I—!”

“Hey—“

“Let you slip away...!”

Her icy exterior shattered, her expression crumpled, and she fell against me, clinging to my shoulders.

“Why did you return?! ...Even as you hold me in contempt...and in fear! What do you seek? What do you desire? What could I possibly give you? Why are you doing this for me...?!”

“Please,” Zero murmured.

“Don’t ever leave me again...!”



## Part 7

I could do nothing but sit there with my arm hanging in midair and Zero clinging to me.

The room was devoid of light, save for the illumination of the moonlight. There was a large accumulation of books and who-knows-how-many flameless candles. Atop a comfy-looking chair was a pile of cushions, forming a bed of sorts.

The cave Zero talked about was surely something like this.

*Is this—your feelings for Zero, Thirteenth?* I could feel the painful intensity of his feelings toward Zero. This room was like a mother's womb. It was dark and confined and sheltered, almost sickeningly soporific and dull.

*Thirteenth—are you serious? While most witches and sorcerers aren't what you'd call normal, you're just on a whole 'nother level.*

"Hey. When're you gonna stop cryin', Miss Witch? Hate to be like this, but I don't got time ta keep your cryin' company. Just go back ta your regular ol' sharp self, please."

Zero turned her head upward as if something had surprised her. The snot and tears streaking her face defaced beauty that even the moon would envy. I felt relatively sure of my own appearance, but seeing how she looked was enough to make me rub at my face with my cuffs. Then I lifted her onto my shoulders, and slowly, her expression returned to normal.

"You are prioritizing your own affairs...even though I am so evidently hurt! There's a limit to how unfeeling you can be! Sympathize with me some more, comfort me some more—"

"I ain't a mercenary by name only; I've had ta eat my meals in front of my dead comrades. Besides, you said somethin' 'bout a trap earlier, but—"

*What did that mean?*

The moment I opened my mouth, the floor broke apart around us. Light and sound faded instantaneously, and I was assaulted by the floating sensation like my guts were rising up to my throat. The tower had collapsed. No, wait, this was—

"Damn it—Thirteenth!"

*I see. A trap, was it?*

When I looked up, we were in the same place we had been summoned to before—the chamber underneath the castle. A distance away, Thirteenth stood exactly as he did last time.

And behind him was a birdcage, seemingly made to order, with Zero locked inside.

“Mercenary!”

“—Zero!”

“Stop. Make no further movement. Get on your knees.”

Having just begun to run, I was the next moment following Thirteenth’s orders to the letter, prostrating myself on the ground.

“Wha...how is this—“

“I did say that the mentally superior could manipulate animals. Humans are also animals, and this chamber was built to amplify my mental prowess. This is my sanctuary.”

“Mercenary, are you alright?!”

“Sides lookin’ like a fool, I’m still healthy as an ox...but dammit...!”

Desperately, I managed only to move a finger to claw at the stone tile. My body would not obey my command. My limbs hadn’t fallen asleep, nor had I lost feeling in them, but I couldn’t get up for the life of me.

“You’re wasting your time. Those with anger in their hearts will fall to the mind of every other.”

*That’s true, eh?* But even so, I was enraged.

Thirteenth took a step forward. Toward me. Zero cried out.

“You...Thirteenth—I will not forgive you! That is my possession! My mercenary, who has come back to me! Return him this instant!”

“Your words are pointless, Zero. There is a bounded field about that birdcage of yours. Even you could not possibly escape it—you will be hurt if you try, so stay put.”

“Don’t order me around, Thirteenth!”

“Then how about I put it this way: please, I beg of you. Until I kill him and set your spirit free, close your eyes and cover your ears for me. Then I will seal away your memories regarding this man.”

“As if! I will never allow that, Thirteenth—Thirteenth!”

Zero shouted and banged against the iron bars, rattling them and causing a clamor. Though there didn’t seem like there was anything she could do inside the doorless birdcage, unable to use sorcery.

I really didn’t want to, but I decided that perhaps I should try reconciliation. I clicked my tongue, and struggled to bring my face up to face Thirteenth.

“I’ve got to say this even now, Thirteenth. There’s a way ta get rid of magic without killin’ all the witches! The ones you’re tryin’ ta purge, like the Coven of Zero’s rebellion and the wayward sorcerers’ chaos, can all be stopped if ya just use ‘Rejection’ on ‘em!” You’ll be able ta get the Book of Zero back, and get rid of all the witches who’ve been causin’ trouble under Zero’s name!”

And then when Albus uses the resulting confusion to organize the novice witches under Solena’s memory, Wenias’ witch troubles would finally come to an end. The existence of magic wouldn’t be forgotten, but with Albus’ efforts perhaps magic could be used as Zero had hoped it would be. I talked on, always glaring up at Thirteenth’s emotionless visage.

“I came here to take her away so we could achieve that. So with all due respect, you must send us off as quickly as possible...Thirteenth!”

“Regrettably, I must refuse. Zero will not leave this place, and nor will she be using the magic ‘Rejection.’”

“...What?”

I was stunned. —*Was my explanation not good enough?* I thought Thirteenth wanted to get the Book of Zero back and get rid of those who’d been misusing the magic Zero’d thought up. I assumed we were after the same things, so he had no reason to refuse. Thirteenth also wasn’t petty enough to decline just because he disliked me or some shit.

“You want the Book of Zero back as soon as possible, too, don’t ya? This way’d—”

“That would solve nothing. Indeed, it would bring a temporary halt to the conflict and return this nation to how it was. The witches would hold their breaths and return to the half-hearted coexistence of the past. But they would bear a new aggravating wound: that of a witches’ uprising.”

Thirteenth dispassionately cut over me.

*It would solve nothing. They would simply return to the former state of things, nursing new wounds.*

## Part 8

—*What was wrong with that?*

The ones who did not want an uneasy coexistence, who rather pushed to win true tranquility for the witches, were ‘that person’ and the Coven of Zero. Why would Thirteenth, someone who fought to purge them—

Be against a return to the way things were?

“—Exactly, mercenary.”

Zero was clutching the bars of her birdcage with her head down when I heard her strained voice.

“Thirteenth’s goal is neither the reclaiming of the Book of Zero nor the resolution of the chaos in Wenias. Those are merely the means. What he seeks is the end which they will bring...”

“C’mon—I’m always tellin’ ya ta explain the situation in a way that even an idiot can understand, ain’t I?! What *does* Thirteenth want then? Ain’t gettin’ the stolen book back the whole point Thirteenth left yer cave?!” I yelled, glowering at Thirteenth. Then, it hit me.

On the end of the unnecessarily large staff Thirteenth was holding shone a scarlet jewel.

*Wasn’t that—the same as the gemstone on Albus’ neck?*

I’m not particularly smart. But I can wrap my head pretty well around conspiracies and secret plots, on account of being a mercenary. What if what Thirteenth wanted wasn’t to end the conflict stemming from the Book of Zero—in other words, the conflict between the witches and the kingdom—but something it would bring about?

That would mean Thirteenth *needed the war if he wanted to achieve his goals at all*.

And the one who stole the Book of Zero and caused the war in Wenias was ‘that person’.

But pretty much every Wenian knew of Thirteenth’s antagonism toward ‘that person’—and the Coven of Zero.

Besides.

Who the heck was ‘that person’, who stole the Book of Zero from the cave, spread magic far and wide in Wenias, and was essentially a figure in the shadows—and where were they now?

I felt beads of sweat spring up all over me. I saw that in Thirteenth’s hand was a single book. *Was that cover made of ebony?*

*—What kind of book was it? You said it was a book about sorcery.*

I had asked Zero, and Zero had answered thus.

*—The cover was ebony polished to a mirror-like sheen, hinged with gold, and embellished in impossible detail.*

In Thirteenth’s grip was a book perfectly fitting that description.

As if it had been there since the very beginning, one could say.

“Hey, wait a sec...it couldn’t be...you can’t be serious, Thirteenth.”

What if the Book of Zero hadn’t been stolen at all?

What if Thirteenth had lied about leaving the cave to search for the book, and instead left to spread the word of magic?

‘That person’, who killed the witches of the cave, stole the Book of Zero and made widely known its teachings, and Thirteenth, who left to chase after them and recover the Book of Zero, and was fighting the witches of Wenias.

It couldn’t be—they couldn’t be one and the same, right?

“To stop the witch hunts completely, it is necessary that the masses be made to think that all the bad witches have disappeared.”

Zero’s voice responded. Thirteenth looked down at me, still expressionless.

“To do so, the bad witches must first be drawn out into the limelight. One must hand them power, opportunities, and turn their smoldering coals into a blazing bonfire. And finally, one must publicly extinguish their flame—or the rank and file will remain in fear of witches.”

Over Zero’s voice, Thirteenth’s speech at the stake echoed back in my head. He had proclaimed loudly that he would hunt down the evil witches for justice and for the people.

“That is why,” Zero strung her words together in a trembling voice, “Thirteenth spread magic throughout this kingdom, and caused the witches to rebel by agitating the Coven of Zero, all under the persona of ‘that person’. And he has made his way into the imperial castle, acting as the sorcerer of good with the power to withstand them. Ever since the beginning—”

*The book had never been stolen.*

—Justice could not exist without evil. Once upon a time, the Church had painted the witches as evil to have the populace trust in its righteousness. Had Thirteenth managed to do what they had once done?

“...It was all planned out?” I asked waveringly. However, it was not a question but a confident statement.

“The Coven of Zero’s revolt...the wayward sorcerers’ riots...you—you planned all of it?! Thirteenth!”

Despite depending on the witches, the people of Wenias could not accept them. That was a clear double standard. Of course, the witches were unhappy to live in such a world.

However, the impression the people had of the witches was far more kind than that of the people of other nations. That the fairytale-like existence of Solena gave a kind of peace of mind was undeniable.

The foundation for cooperation had been laid, yet there were also the embers of war. That was why Thirteenth had chosen Wenias for his plans. By spreading the power of magic and destroying

the balance of power, he would create an opportunity for the eruption of the witches' dissatisfaction. Once he had done that, he could hunt and kill the rebel witches under the banner of righteousness.

—Everything was for the “true tranquility of the witches” that would result.

A deep, tired sigh escaped through Thirteenth's lips.

“Planned out—I suppose it was so. Still, it was the witches and people of this land who came to conclusions and took action through their own conscious thought. I did not order them to.”

## Part 9

Thirteenth's long-absent voice had no tone to it whatsoever, and sounded very much inhuman.

“The subtle wrongs they continually suffered were pent up within them... and because they were allowed to come to a head without being resolved, the bad blood would never end. And so, in a not-so-distant future, the revolt would begin in Wenias. I did nothing but speed its arrival. Those who wanted to fight were the witches of this land. As it were, they acted per the path I had prepared for them.”

“What *path*?! That there's goin' into conspiracy territory.”

I could still barely move, and with great effort I spat on the floor. Thirteenth seemed not to notice.

“I have a correction to make, Zero. I did nothing to agitate the Coven of Zero. All I have done is ensure the spread of magic throughout Wenias. There were also numerous paths that the Coven of Zero could have taken to do what is right and coexist with the humans, but they instead chose the path that would lead to their own destruction.”

“A path that would lead to their own destruction...?”

“Yes. By betraying the trust of the humans with the Revels of Revenge, the Coven of Zero chose the path of evil. Thus—I had to settle for the path of righteousness until, by saving the king and protecting him from his witch attackers, I had become the jester who performed the plays of justice that the people longed for. Unbelievable...they were the ones who wished to defend this kingdom as the force of good, even using Zero's name in theirs, but they ended up becoming the exact opposite. This is why the situation is now so difficult: there are so many unknowns that things are not proceeding logically...ten years went to waste as a result of this.”

Thirteenth hunted his broad shoulders slightly and sighed, knitting his eyebrows in seeming frustration.

“Misunderstandings, vengeance, and vengeance for vengeance—the birth of a nation from conflict will invariably mark the world with misery. Zero, you did not have to see this. If only you had waited for me in the cave, and simply accepted the kingdom I would have created. You would have reigned as the very symbol of peace and prosperity, the mother of magic, over a world where witches are revered as righteous icons and magic is known by all to be the noblest art.”

“Fool! Have I ever fancied that, Thirteenth?! If you had simply thought to return, I would have been—!”

“You have always said that you wanted to see the sky, haven’t you?”

Zero swallowed sharply. *Sky*, Zero’s lips mouthed the word.

“You longed for the world outside the cave. You said that you wanted others to know the magic of the Book of Zero, and that you wanted a kingdom where everyone could live comfortably and happily. Indeed, I warned that magic was an art which would bring the world’s downfall. But still, you clung to the Book of Zero like a childhood dream. Therefore, I decided that I would grant that dream.”

Everything had been for the witches’ peace. —And through that, Zero’s happiness.

*I see, Thirteenth.* This was only becoming more and more mad.

“Now is the time to build a nation, Zero. Everything will be over very soon. Everything. With the words of Solena’s granddaughter—the name was Albus, wasn’t it?—all of the witches who have chosen to fight will come to defeat me. That is, ‘that person,’ to whom they have pledged their absolute loyalty through blood pacts.”

The breaching of a witches’ blood pact meant annihilation. What Dog-Face had told me suddenly clicked together in my mind.

—Them wayward sorcerers tried to kill Thirteenth.

—They didn’t even get the chance to fight before ‘that person’s might struck ‘em down.

Ah—so that was it. So, this was the path?

To learn magic, it was necessary to be inducted into the Coven of Zero, which required one to swear their allegiance to ‘that person’ in a witches’ blood pact. Even the wayward sorcerers had originally learned their magic from the Coven of Zero.

What this meant was that essentially all magic-using witches had sworn their loyalty to Thirteenth. That was why when those witches attempted to kill Thirteenth after taking hostages, they were annihilated by the power of their blood pacts.

The same thing was going to happen again. Except this time, on a far greater scale.

I could already see the Coven of Zero and the wayward sorcerers, normally enemies, gathering together and joining forces to defeat Thirteenth.

And the moment the witches who mobilized began their assault upon him, they would be annihilated without a trace. —In other words, the evil witches would be annihilated before the witch-fearing populace.

Thirteenth alone would remain—and just like that, his righteousness would become unquestionable.

That was Thirteenth's "path".

"—No!"

Zero shouted and rattled the birdcage.

"No, no, no—! Are you really going to kill every one of the witches of this land, Thirteenth?! Even the elderly witches with their crystallized wisdom and knowledge? Even the young witches with their hopes and dreams, would you have them all die for my sake?!"

"The only ones to die will be those who choose to fight. Only those foolish and thoughtless enough to abandon themselves to someone as dubious as 'that person'—someone whose true identity and whereabouts are unknown. Such philistines were unworthy of the power in the first place. The wise old witches still live modestly and inconspicuously, waiting for the storm to pass."

It was the consequence for thoughtlessness. They were responsible for their own actions. They made their own decisions, they fought on their own volition, and they would die by their own hands.

*True, there really was no point in sympathizing with people like those.*

*But, Thirteenth.*

These purported *truths* you adhere to—ain't all convenient for you.

"—Solena then, what about her?"

## Part 10

Though I still could not move, I grumbled as menacingly as I could. Thirteenth looked at me coldly.

"Was she a foolish and thoughtless witch? Did she want this war? Who set the stage for the Revels of Revenge? Who caused the plague?! Solena used her sorcery just to save the village, didn't she?!"

“Again, everything is the result of the choices of the witches of this land. A few witches who had learned magic became interested in its underlying sorcery, and conducted a test of plague sorcery. Thus, as anti-witch feelings were running high, it was obvious that performing a conspicuous ritual there would only ignite the people’s anger, regardless of whether the ritual was truly intended to cleanse the village of the affliction. It was Solena’s choice to disregard such dangers and proceed with her sorcery.”

*Hey Dog-face. Your guess was way off. It wasn't 'that person'—Thirteenth—who spread the plague, just some wayward sorcerers. ...Either way though, it was Thirteenth who made it possible in the first place.*

Nevertheless, it was indeed Solena’s own choice. She knew that she would be wrongly accused if she saved the village, but did so regardless. I suppose one could call her a shortsighted witch.

“Fine...but what about Albus? Sure she chose to fight, 'n sure she’s impulsive, but she’s just a kid! They killed her parents, the family she loved—her mentors! So you get her on false charges, and when she doesn’t listen to ya, you treat her like nothin’ but a tool 'n burn her at the stake?!”

Along with my cry of anger I strained my muscles, and my upper body rose a wee bit. A faint shadow of irritation fluttered past Thirteenth’s gaze. *Those with anger in their hearts will fall to the mind of every other*—was it?

*Better not get mad then, Thirteenth. Do you not like how I spout facts and logic?*

“Real picky, Thirteenth. Do ya just ignore facts that ain’t convenient for ya? What about you 'n Zero’s teacher? Her comrades? Were they foolish, shortsighted, and wanting war?!”

“To shun change and live a closed-off existence is also foolish! Each day was simply constant rehashing of circular arguments! She and the others halted all attempts at thought, and had died on the inside long ago. The singular exception was Zero. I proposed we direct our attention toward the outside world, provided some options, and tried persuasion. However, the answer I received was a stubborn no. They were afraid of Zero’s power, and wanted to stifle it.”

“Then what about Zero herself?!”

Thirteenth’s expression changed instantly. A deep furrow chiseled itself into his brow with clear malevolence and contempt. It seemed like jealousy to me. *Ain't it pleasant, Thirteenth. Bein' jealous of someone like me.*

Thanks to it—though just barely, I could move again.

“When’ve you ever given Zero any options, eh? Do ya even know what she wants? Look at her well, Thirteenth. Do ya think she approves of what you’re doin’? When’s she ever told ya, with a smile on her face, ‘thank you for killing those troublesome sorcerers back then’?!”

For a moment, Thirteenth's gaze darted from me to Zero. Taking advantage of his lapse, I got up and at the same time broke into a sprint.

I covered the distance between Thirteenth and myself in a flash and, grabbing at something in my bag, hurled it at him. The item flew past Thirteenth and shattered on the floor.

With but a cut on his cheek caused by a flying shard of glass, Thirteenth slashed his arm like a scythe and a bolt of lightning arced through the air, striking me. I fell to the ground.

"Mercenary!"

Shouting, Zero reached out from between the bars of her birdcage. I wanted to take her hand, but this wasn't the time. Just a little while longer.

"Ugh, it is such a pain to hold back..."

Thirteenth spat as if irritated. He held back on that lightning? I'd known for a long while that static shocks were unpleasant, but this one just now was real strong. I couldn't get up.

—But eh, whatever.

Thirteenth suddenly struck his staff against the floor. As he etched a circle into the ground around him, thin tongues of flame burned around me. —A magic circle.

"You have committed no crime. With the resolve you showed by climbing a sheer cliff using but two knives for Zero's sake, perhaps I would have welcomed you as Zero's attendant in happier times. However—Zero has become far too engrossed in you."

Through the thin veil of fire that separated us, I glowered at Thirteenth.

"She'd spent ten years alone, in a cave, after being abandoned, 'n you think it's weird she's engrossed after finally meetin' a decent, honest *person* like herself...?! Don't resent me, Thirteenth—and definitely don't blame Zero, that'd just be barkin' up the wrong tree. You stole Zero's comrades from her, 'n gave her loneliness and pain! Can ya imagine how starved she must've been for some conversation...how starved she must've been for some company?!"

"Everything was for Zero's sake!"

"Don't lie, Thirteenth! It was all for yourself! It was all '*cause ya wanted it that way!* There's no hidin' that!"

"You've been with her for a few days at best—and you think to understand her? You make me laugh!"

"Cut the bullshit! How could someone understand that gluttonous, lazy, cocky, selfish, common-sense-lacking, impulsive witch?! But, Thirteenth. I ain't gonna let you shut up a beautiful woman like that with your intimidation, or stand there while ya piss her off or make her cry. I'm a man

and a mercenary. It's a man's job to love women, 'n it's a mercenary's job to follow his client's orders for pay! Oh, and I forgot to mention somethin', Thirteenth!"

I bared my teeth and snarled.

"I don't want that gift of yours. I'm still the witch's mercenary, 'n my client never forgets to give me my pay. —That's why I'm givin' it back to ya."

"What—?"

"That magic medicament ya gave me."

Thirteenth paled and whirled to face the birdcage. Unfortunately, he was too late. The liquid from the broken glass bottle had already seeped onto the magic circle imprisoning Zero. With a final dull glow, the circle vanished from the floor.

"You—!"

Thirteenth began to say something, but was cut short by an explosion that threatened to burst my eardrums. The birdcage that had been Zero's prison was blown to smithereens.

"—Actually, Mercenary, that's called using it. Not giving it back."

Brushing off bits of metal, Zero stepped out of the wreckage of the birdcage.

"Don't go ruinin' my good name. I tossed it back to him. Sadly, it broke on the ground when he dodged it. I guess he didn't want it anymore. I ain't got no fault for how that turned out."

"Hm, a man with a demon's tongue. —I don't dislike that in the slightest."

Cackling, Zero shook with laughter. Her emotion quickly vanished when she faced Thirteenth.

"—Thirteenth. My only brethren, and my final peer."

"Retire, Zero. You stand no chance against me now."

"So, you have taken every last bit of magical power from the witches you killed to bolster your own, Thirteenth? Do you forget the reason why I am Zero, and you Thirteenth?"

"It is an intractable reference value for a witch of the Murky Black—the nothingness from which comes everything. Nevertheless, knowledge and skill does at times surpass innate talent."

"Then do you dare to test that claim? Thirteenth, I am but a bit displeased!"

As she spoke those words a rush of inky particles crowded about Zero, forming a magic circle in an instant. Thirteenth clucked his tongue in annoyance, and a second later conjured forth an identical magic circle. At the same time, the fire that surrounded me vanished. For all he could do, Thirteenth didn't seem like he could maintain two skills at once.

Both simultaneously began chanting an incantation.

“Auldo, Geldo, Iin, Dei, Koa, Deya, Zeya—By the name of the sovereign of despair who gazes disdainfully forth from the crossroads of desire and thirst, I call forth from the murky black depths the Gate of Rot.”

Suddenly, the world changed. The chamber’s walls and floor began to rattle and crumble, and from the dark gaping maw that opened at my feet, something was—something which emanated an unbearable arctic chill was creeping up toward us.

I could feel the dread of death at the nape of my neck. Its jaws and teeth were tearing into my heart.

“Servant of strife bound by covenant of blood and flesh, descend now upon the fool’s debauch and feast!”

“Manservant of strife bound by covenant of blood and flesh, descend now upon the fool’s debauchery and feast!”

“The Forbidden Book, Final Verse—Segtol Meidis! Sanction this! I am he called Thirteenth!!”

“The Forbidden Book, Final Verse—Segtol Meidis! Sanction this! I declareth myself Zero!!”

And the darkness flowed forth.

The squirming darkness at Thirteenth and Zero’s backs surged mightily outward, each seeking to eat the other into oblivion as they swooped toward each other. They clashed in a frontal assault, and hell began as shadow consumed shadow. The air became pregnant with the smell of blood, flesh, death, battle—

I felt a violent urge to vomit surge upward. The two masses of darkness eating at each other were—both were masses of humans. They each devoured the other, each slaughtered the other, shouting, laughing.

Did Zero invent this magic? —What was the point of this? This was magic neither useful for hunting, nor protecting others, nor saving lives. Alongside the urge to vomit crept a fear that made me want to cry out and run away as far as I could. But where to? How?

*Crunch*, I heard a muted sound. I looked up, and my eyes went wide.

Thirteenth was gritting his teeth with a despairing look on his face. Zero in contrast was composed and smiling, her eyes filled with a deep, steadily wavering darkness.

To my surprise, Zero had Thirteenth completely outmatched. The colliding darkness steadily approached Thirteenth, and I could hear his teeth grate together.

“Impossible—this gap in power—!”

*Cough*, Thirteenth coughed up blood and somehow avoided falling to his knees.

He was pointing ahead as if exhorting the darkness onward, and as I watched, his outstretched finger split open and blood gushed from the wound.

—No, this couldn't continue.

Thirteenth was going to die. —By Zero's hand.

"Zero! That's enough! It's over!" I shouted at once. Just then, Thirteenth crumpled to his knees. Seeing the darkness sweep down on Thirteenth to consume him, I moved without thinking.

*Why am I doing this for him?*

It was too late for such thoughts. I covered Thirteenth and pushed us both to the ground, clenching my teeth, half-prepared to die.

It was my ambition as a man and a mercenary to die valiantly while guarding Zero. But to die protecting Thirteenth of all things, this was just comical. *Whoosh*, a gale carrying the stench of blood blew past, and silence returned. At this surprising turn of events, I remained collapsed on top of Thirteenth and timidly raised my head.

"What...? I'm alive—"

"—Zero!"

Thirteenth yelled, still pinned to the floor. The next moment, I was pushed away by a formidable force, and sent rolling across the ground.

*What the heck happened?* I thought as I approached Thirteenth's figure, and there I saw Zero's body, covered in blood.

—What had happened to Zero?

Zero had had the upper hand. Thirteenth had no way to win under those circumstances.

"W—what's goin' on?! How's Zero hurt?"

"Do you still not understand?! Zero has taken on your burden. There must be a magical seal somewhere on your body signifying a bond with Zero!"

"I don't got—"

*Anythin' of the sort*, I was about to yell back when I started. I remembered that while I was bathing at the inn in Foamicaum, Zero had drawn something on me.

Could that—be it? She had told me I would thank her in the future, but this?

“To cut that bond between your souls and set Zero free, either she must release the spell, or you must perish in my bounded field. If it had been otherwise, I would have simply turned you into charcoal in an instant!”

I finally understood.

The night we were captured by Thirteenth—in other words the night I left Zero’s side—I was attacked by the witch Dog-Face helped along, and was run through the abdomen by magic. According to Albus, Zero coughed up blood and toppled over at roughly the same time.

I had taken a hit and was left with no wound, while Zero was injured in my stead.

—Hold your fire, you’ll hit Zero.

Thirteenth’s words then made sense now.

## Part 11

“What...what were ya thinking?! The heck’s a client doing protectin’ their mercenary?! Hey Thirteenth, do somethin’ with magic from that Book of Safeguardin’!”

“The four volumes of the Book of Zero each require vastly different aptitudes, even though they are as one book. I cannot use the Book of Safeguarding—why did you save me?!”

“Shut up, I just happened to! Ain’t you the root of all evil besides?!”

As we shouted back and forth, I heard the faint sound of laughter.

It was Zero. —It seemed that she was still alive.

“So it seems that having two large men together is far too many. Stop shouting. How unseemly. This is but a scratch. Magic circles are safeguards against one’s own spells...though as it went through Mercenary’s body, my skin was slightly eaten away...”

*Oof*, Zero voiced unhurriedly, and slowly got up.

“The power did go to my head slightly, however. I could not restrain it at all. Perhaps, had Mercenary not intervened, I would have killed you. This a good lesson for my pride. I shall admonish myself.”

Thirteenth’s eyes went wide.

“You...attempted to go easy on me? With that much power?”

“Are you amazed by our difference in ability? —But unfortunately, it is not a matter of ability. It is a matter of which one of us invented this technique.”

“What do you mean?”

“Thirteenth, that book contains—“ Zero said smugly. With an expression that seemed to say: *did you honestly not realize? Are you a fool? I always knew I was the true prodigy*; she laughed. Zero then spoke with a terrible eloquence.

“Errata. Many of them.”

Thirteenth’s jaw dropped. It was an extreme surprise to see that from someone as poor in expression as Thirteenth.

“What? Errata?! So you made mistakes in documenting the spells?!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I am a genius. Geniuses don’t make mistakes, but perpetrate them.”

“Then these errata...”

“Let us repeat it once more then. From the second section. On three?”

Thirteenth dutifully did as Zero said. On the count of three, they repeated the incantation.

“Servant of strife bound by covenant of blood and flesh, descend upon the fool’s debauch—“

“Manservant of strife bound by covenant of blood and flesh, descend upon the fool’s debauchery —“

They stopped in the middle of their chants. Thirteenth grasped his head as if he were a great intellect who had failed at the simplest problem in the world. —So the spells were different.

And when I thought about it, Albus would end her spells with “my name is Albus”, but Zero always followed hers up with “I declareth myself Zero”.

“So what’s that mean? You sayin’ there’re misspelled spells in the Book of Zero, and when ya use those, the power of the magic goes down?”

“Precipitously. A gluttonous, lazy, selfish, cocky, common-sense-lacking, impulsive witch I may be, but I am also a most extraordinary witch. I would never forget safeguards to protect myself.”

She looked at me with an intense, mocking gaze, and I turned away as quickly as I could.

*It’s all true, ain’t it? Don’t go holdin’ it against me now.*

“Besides, just about all books on sorcery are written in code that no one but the authors themselves can understand. When it is written ‘the guts of a mouse’ but is meant as ‘medicinal plants’, for instance. There are similar errata in the Book of Zero, of course. And as for higher magics, witches who ignore the errata will find that their magic fails to take effect at all.”

“Huh,” I mused. Back when Albus had complained that there was magic that wouldn’t work at all when following the book’s instructions, Zero had acted as if it were all but natural.

“So that’s what ya mean by there’re safeguards in the book?! It’s just writin’ the wrong things, ain’t it?!”

“Rather simple, right? In other words, no one could ever win against me using magic from the Book of Zero. That is more or less how I decided the outcome of this duel. And by using magic that took effect quickly, I made sure that Thirteenth could not defend himself with magic.”

Still holding his head in his hands, Thirteenth sat down where he was. He breathed a deep and heavy sigh.

“It’s no wonder...you were so strangely confident...”

As Zero laughed her cackling laugh, I looked out at the unobstructed view that the collapsed wall of the underground chamber now offered. Zero had blown apart the cliffside wall with her magic, and on the other side of the gaping opening, I could see the forest, with the sun emerging above it.

It had been the dead of night when I made my climb up, but dawn had broken before I even knew it.

“Well then, Thirteenth, your wily plans to spread the art of magic and cause a rebellion, rule over Wenias as the sorcerer to quash it, and secure an ideal witches’ nation have now been laid bare... but even now, the witches of Wenias must be gathering to overthrow you. I should expect a large-scale offensive to begin across the nation in two to three days’ time.”

That was right. With the attempted immolation of Albus, the call to arms against Thirteenth had risen to a feverish pitch among witches. This wasn’t the end just yet.

“Just as Mercenary had said earlier, I plan to combine my strength with that of Solena’s juvenile granddaughter to seal away magic, and take care of my mistake—the Book of Zero. The efforts of a *certain* foolish and shortsighted halfwit have made the situation far more wide-reaching and more troublesome than I had anticipated, but—“

Zero stopped there and the edge of her lip curled upward.

“Thirteenth—what will you do?”

Thirteenth looked up slowly and gazed at Zero, who appeared as if she were challenging him.

He showed no signs of wanting to retrieve his staff, which lay in a corner of the room, and it seemed that he had lost all will to fight.

“What indeed...” Thirteenth stood, answering vaguely.

“I tried to take this kingdom for my own so as to deliver it into your hands, as I thought that was what you wanted. If that is not so, then I no longer have any interest in or attachment to this kingdom.”

So that was what he had to say for stirring up revolt in Wenias. I may even go as far as to say his selfishness—or rather, his Zero-ishness—was rather refreshing.

Thirteenth lightly raised his hand, and his staff rose from the floor and drifted into its waiting embrace.

Blood was still dripping from Thirteenth's hand due to the flesh wound he had suffered during his duel with Zero, but he coolly offered a hand to Zero and helped her up from where she sat.

“Zero—everything shall be as you wish it.”

## Part 12

Though we had defeated Thirteenth, there were still challenges in store.

The witches were gathering in response to Albus' proclamation, and would be coming for Thirteenth very soon. A large-scale conflict that may tear the kingdom apart from the inside out and the eradication of the witches by their contracts of blood were both close at hand.

Albus and co. were supposed to be out and about to prevent any of this from happening, but—

—Well, I suppose it should have been obvious.

Powerless humans had gained the power of magic and finally stood as those with strength, but then heard that their power would be removed from them. Of course, they wouldn't accept that, and if there were those who would try to regardless, they would focus all their efforts on stopping them.

And so, as I climbed the precipitous cliff, met with Zero, and quarreled with Thirteenth, Albus had run into a small bit of trouble trying to establish a bounded field for the sealing away of magic.

At that point, Albus' call to arms against Thirteenth had finally been heard everywhere. As the Coven of Zero and wayward sorcerers rejoiced that it was at last the time to fight, they heard of Albus' seeming betrayal and went mad with anger.

So, the plan to defeat Thirteenth was put off, and killing Albus, who was poised to steal away magic and the future of the witches, was made the primary objective. Yesterday's ally was today's enemy. —I felt that when it came to working toward a common interest, witches were pretty much just like mercenaries.

Of course, Albus wasn't going to let them take her life sitting down.

However, she was outnumbered. Already here it seemed that the noble soul would have to die a noble death—and then the spectacle I figured Albus would have a hard time believing began to unfold.

“The Book of Capturing, Verse Eight— Kaprata!”

In concert with the sonorous voice, innumerable vines burst out of the ground, wrapping themselves around the witches coming for Albus and lashing them to the ground.

Albus was on the ground with Dog-Face shielding her. She timidly opened her eyes, and took in the figure of the man standing wordlessly in front of her with his arm outstretched.

“T—Thirteenth?!”

In other words, she laid eyes upon the man who had entered coolly with the sun at his back—a large man who looked undeniably like he was an evil sorcerer.

“I am here as well.”

“Same here.”

Forestalling Albus, who looked as though she was about to run away screaming, Zero and I showed ourselves. Albus opened and closed her mouth in complete confusion.

Well, this was to be expected. If our roles were reversed, I figure I’d be just as confused as she was.

Just a little while earlier—Zero had defeated Thirteenth in the castle, and he had decided to lend her his strength.

I didn’t know how he managed to do it, but Thirteenth seemed to have the mysterious ability to discern every detail of the Coven of Zero’s movements, and—of all things—had asked, “it seems that Solena’s heir is going to be killed, is that all right?” What a stupid question.

Without even sparing the time to shout *like hell it is*, I hurried into the castle, had the kingdom’s fastest horse hitched to a horse-drawn cart and sped to where I was now. Here—was where the academy’s entrance used to be, in a forest near La Tête. I had made it just in time. To end the fighting without more bloodshed, we needed Albus’ help. In a rare sight, Zero had also been in a hurry, and even Thirteenth, unsettlingly, decided to lend a hand.

But to Albus, who didn’t know anything about what had transpired, her greatest enemy and her only allies had appeared together. Being confronted with such a sight would make anyone yell.

“Why’re you with Thirteenth?! And why’s he helping me?!”

*See? She yelled.* Thirteenth sighed solemnly. Sighing seemed to be a habit for this guy.

"It is a long story and we don't have the time, as we seem to be surrounded—it would be unfortunate were reinforcements to arrive, so I will keep it brief. I am the founder of the Coven of Zero—in other words the 'that person' you all know."

"Whaaaaaaa?"

*Bit too brief, Thirteenth. Albus' bout ta faint from shock.*

"Wait, what...! How the heck—"

"Thirteenth was the mastermind behind everything, and he has joined our side as the mastermind, child."

"Joined our side...but—Thirteenth?! And Thirteenth being 'that person'—but he's the Coven of Zero's mortal enemy...!"

"His plan was ta destroy the coven he had created himself ta imprint upon the public that he was a force a' good, and through that, attain so-called 'true tranquility' fer the witches. Fer that, he needed both righteous and wicked witches, 'n' played roles on both sides."

"N—no way! How can you expect me to b-believe that out of the blue—"

Even with my interjection Albus was only getting more and more confused. I suppose because this information was all too sudden and shocking.

Hearing Albus' bewilderedness, Thirteenth waved his staff lightly and held it aloft before Albus' eyes. The ruby gemstone gleamed, and our figures became visible within its depths.

"The precious orbs the witches of the Coven of Zero wear on their necks were all once part of this stone. Consequently, the activities of those who wear those orbs may all be managed and monitored from this staff. I knew that the beast warrior was returning to Zero's side, that you set out to seal away magic, everything. Thus we knew to hasten our way here. —Is that enough clarification for you?"

Albus reached for her neck and tore off her choker. It couldn't feel good knowing that she had worn it for an entire year.

With still disbelieving and uneasy eyes, she looked at Thirteenth.

"Is Thirteenth...really 'that person'? The one who stole the Book of Zero from Zero, and gave magic to Wenias...?"

"Yes. I plotted to allow anyone and everyone to learn of magic to give rise to the wayward sorcerers, and came to this kingdom with plans for the Coven of Zero to suppress them as sorcerers of justice and win the people's trust. Unfortunately, Solena's death changed that. With the Revels of Revenge the Coven of Zero became a figure of villainy and fear, so left with no choice I took the position of righteousness upon myself."

Solena's death. Albus seemed to regain her strength at those words and stared at Thirteenth with hate.

"That's bullshit! You're the one who started a plague and set Solena up to get her killed! Your plans changed? How, when you meant to kill Solena all along—!"

"Not so, child. The cause of the plague was wayward sorcerers who, unsatisfied with mere magic, were experimenting with its predecessor—sorcery. Thirteenth was not involved."

Zero calmly cut through Albus' tirade. Perhaps it was to be expected—but Albus lost her temper.

"So what? It's still all Thirteenth's fault for bringing magic to Wenias in the first place! He's the one who recklessly spread magic around and stirred up rebellion! Don't think I'll forgive him just because he wasn't directly involved. Thirteenth murdered my grandmother!"

"Woah there kid, calm down. This ain't the time ta—"

"No, she is right."

Thirteenth raised a hand at my attempt at intervention. However, his gaze never left Albus'. Even as Albus grew uneasy, Thirteenth continued to glare right back. Then—

"—I'm sorry."

His words were incredibly brief, yet unbearably heavy. It was a bizarre apology.

Albus shut her mouth in surprise and grimaced as if trying to hold back tears.

"The great Solena...she was a witch who possessed prudence which my imprudent self could not match. Everything changed with her passing. She chose death so as to change everything. Not a day passes that I do not long to know what may have happened had I known of the witch hunt sooner, and managed to save her from her fate. The great Solena—I would have liked to have been graced by her gaze, even but once."

Rare traces of pain and remorse stained Thirteenth's usually—miserly countenance.

For the sake of experiment, some wayward sorcerers caused a plague.

Seeking to cleanse the land of it, Solena used her sorcery.

And the villagers, thinking Solena to be the epidemic's source, killed her.

This was Thirteenth's single and most drastic miscalculation. He could not have imagined that Solena would sacrifice her own life for the sake of the humans.

"It is only right for you, Solena's heir, to despise and kill me. Excluding Zero alone, I swear that I shall not object to any death you may dole out to me in this world. —Thus, I beseech you. Allow me the chance to correct my past mistakes. I require your strength."

No... Albus' lips moved, but no sound came out. Thirteenth broke the silence of anticipation for an objection, lightly smoothing the hem of his robe and adjusting his sitting posture.

"How go the magic circles?"

Uh, Albus tried to say something. She hesitated for a while before murmuring "not done."

"Even the circles I'd managed to draw might've been erased by now...no one will help me...! Everyone agreed that we needed to take down Thirteenth, but talking about banishing magic made them all mad..."

"Well if I'd spent years learnin' to use magic, 'n all of a sudden someone just tells me it ain't gonna be allowed anymore, I wouldn't just let that slide either."

"I guess that's true," Albus made a disappointed face.

If owning gunpowder was suddenly banned, then I'd be rebelling too. Learning to use it took time in and of itself, and either way I valued having it around.

"But no matter how unjustifiable it may be, if we do not get rid of magic, the witches who come to slay me will be obliterated by the power of their blood contracts."

"...So as long as they don't attack you they won't be obliterated? Then why don't you just disappear from the kingdom?"

Thirteenth sighed gravely at Albus' heavy question. His attitude was as though there were a bad student before him, but rather than Zero's merry explanations, Thirteenth seemed to think it profoundly troublesome.

"If I hide myself away, who will protect Wenias from the witches? Masses of helpless humans will be slaughtered. Do you mean to say that you—without even any means to deter attack—can take this kingdom, and in an absurd bout of omnipotence, throw out all the hatred that has amassed and lead the witches?"

"Well..."

"No, but..." Albus muttered unhappily. She had admitted that Thirteenth's prowess was beyond hers in the past. Albus wasn't foolish enough to answer yes now.

"In that case, the erasure of magic is unavoidable. Draw a diagram of the magic circle in detail on some paper. I shall then etch it on this land."

"You? But how—"

"It is an application of summoning. Propagating a drawing is nothing compared to summoning people."

"Hey, Ms. Witch. I dunno how ta say this...but he's weirdly reliable, ain't he?"

I'd be charmed if I were a girl. I unthinkingly murmured it out loud, and Zero nodded.

"If one can place faith in him, Thirteenth can be a dependable man. He is fundamentally untrustworthy, however."

Looking at the figure Albus had drawn on her paper, Thirteenth fell briefly into thought, then looked up.

"Wenias is a kingdom surrounded by mountain ranges. I will place five small-scale magic circles in an arrangement bounding the interior of the ranges, and link them together to form a composite magic circle. I will be the one to draw this magic circle, but the one to control it will be you, witch of the Lunar Chant. You will bear a proportionate burden. Prepare yourself to lose the ability to harness both magic and sorcery, just as all the other witches will."

"I-I know that much at least!"

"The cornerstone of this will be Zero's Rejection. —Zero. We require the head of a fallen beast."

As one might expect, I froze. At the same time, Dog-Face's expression also hardened.

"In order to have the demons of the Book of Zero sanction Rejection upon this land, we must summon the high-ranking demon that controls them. However, we have both drained too much magical strength in our small bout earlier. Without a sacrifice of fine quality, we will be unable to restrain the demon."

"W-woah woah woah wait wait wait! Don't say that so lightly!"

"Yeah, Thirteenth! Like hell I'll let my big bro's head be sacrificed!"

*Alright, look here, Dog-Face, ya can't just push all the danger on me like that. Should I just cut your dumb dog head off right here 'n now?* But Thirteenth too simply looked at me as if to ask, "and why's that?"

—Just me. Damn it, these guys were all after my head.

"If we do not, either masses of witches will die, or masses of the people. If we do not seal off magic within two, three days, the witches who have gathered from all over the kingdom to defeat me will begin their invasion, and the amount of chaos caused through magic will increase explosively. Unfortunately, expended magical power is not something that can recover in two to three days at most."

"So you're telling us to die?!" I shouted angrily. Zero rapped my shoulder with a fist.

"Don't shout, Mercenary. I would never kill you. However, Mercenary. You may keep your head attached—but I will borrow that body of yours."

"M—my body. What the heck do ya mean?!"

“As we only need to extract an affirmation, simply summoning the demon into Mercenary’s body for dialogue will suffice. Thus, my burden will be light as well. Of course, it is a given that we must use the body of a fallen beast for this as well, but...”

*Puttin’ a demon in my body—it ain’t that simple of a matter, Ms. Witch.*

*Sure, Albus had summoned a demon into her body to divine Zero’s location, but was that seriously gonna happen to me? It wasn’t a laughing matter.*

“Don’t be unreasonable, Zero! While it is the body of a bestial warrior, and the demon would happily possess it—if we are unable to control the demon, it could go on a rampage and lay the entire kingdom to ruin!”

“I will not allow that to happen. I am a witch of the Murky Black, who had demons begging to me in my youth, a peerless prodigy who has formed contracts with demons with nary a sacrifice to be seen. Even in my drained state, I can at least manage a demon summoned into a vessel.”

“But—!”

“I would argue this with you, but we have little time left. I will state it plainly, Thirteenth. I absolutely will not kill Mercenary.”

“We have an agreement,” Zero said, showing me the wound on her thumb. —Well, there really didn’t seem to be time left, what with the witches Thirteenth had immobilized with magic and the smoke signals going up all over in the forest. Something was drawing near. The enemy seemed determined to stop the magic-sealing ritual at all costs. If we were to retreat here, it seemed certain that riots would break out all over the kingdom.

The less harm done, the easier it would be to deal with things afterward. If we were to perform the ritual, then now was the only time to do it.

“That’s how it is, Mercenary. I understand your fear. This may be an unreasonable request, but—”

Zero looked up into my eyes.

“I implore you, will you not place your trust in me?”

Zero’s expression was very serious. But my life was on the line here.

After a brief period of inner conflict—

“Hell no!”

I refused deftly. Predictably, Zero was taken aback, and her eyes opened wide.

“Do...do you even know what you’re saying? Speak after you’ve given thought to the circumstances! Even demons hold the world in higher regard!”

Confronted by words I had heard before, I snorted and gazed down at Zero.

“I don’t give a damn ‘bout the world. I’m the thing most precious to myself. I ain’t the kinda kind soul who goes ‘sure, go ahead’ when asked. —You know this, dontcha, *master?*”

Zero was momentarily dumbstruck. She stared at my face motionlessly, then burst into shrill laughter.

“Yes. Yes of course—but even so. I am your employer, and you are my mercenary. Let me rephrase what I said—this is an order! Trust in me, mercenary. I will never take your life.”

I crossed my arms and looked up at the sky. I was a mercenary. Mercenaries followed the orders of their employers. No matter how ridiculous the order, so long as I recognized them as my employer.

“...Well, I guess if it’s an order.”

I forced a smile. *Pardon me for my stiff grin. I was born a coward.*

*Heh*, Zero chuckled quietly, then assumed a solemn expression.

“Then—starting now, I will perform the magic-sealing ritual. Thirteenth! Lay out two magic-sealing bounded fields. One, a small field to protect us. The other to seal away the magic of this land. Child, obey Thirteenth’s direction!”

“G-got it!”

“Mercenary! Dog! It appears the guests who have been trailing us have arrived. Please receive them. We will set out a small bounded field to negate all magic—but we cannot do the same for physical attacks, and sorcery is an exact art, such that one misstep when performing the ritual will result in failure. We will be completely defenseless.”

“...Guests?”

Then I realized—we were encircled. I sensed twenty good-for-nothing humans surrounding us. We really didn’t even have the option of running away at this point. There was nothing to do but brace for the worst.

Almost all at the same time, Thirteenth clicked his tongue resignedly, Dog-Face and I readied our swords, and the chanting of magic rose from all around. *Ahhh, I really do hate sorcerers.*

I heaved a sigh, then roared with my body and soul, charging forward with sword in hand.

Thanks to the bounded field, no magic could reach Zero and the others, so our targets were the attacking bears and wolves and such controlled by the witches. They were more fearsome opponents than humans were, but it felt much better to kill them than humans.

“Let us get underway, Lunar Chant! Zero!” Thirteenth spoke sharply, and drew circles on the ground with his staff. Just as Albus had drawn in his note, they were five circles joined by one large circle. Thirteenth recited something, muttering, and a complex pattern emerged to fill every nook and cranny of the figure.

“Huh...wait, how’re you doing that?! How’re you drawing a magic circle by chanting a spell?!” Albus shouted in amazement, but I didn’t even have the knowledge to be amazed by it. Even if I did, I had the impression that everything Thirteenth did was unusual, so I probably wouldn’t be surprised anyway.

In the blink of an eye, the smaller magic circle was complete. With all his strength, Thirteenth impaled its center with his staff. When he did so, the magic circle expanded greatly as if stretched, and became a ray of light as it raced far past.

“The magic circle has been enlarged to target size, transcription complete—now, Lunar Chant!”

On Thirteenth’s command, Albus hurriedly got on her knees and lifted her arms wide.

“Don’t let them! Get reinforcements now!”

“Reinforcements!” The cry went up everywhere among the witches. Dog-Face ran over, looking around nervously.

“This doesn’t feel good, big bro. —The small fries’re retreating.”

It really was so. The presences surrounding us drew back like the tide. At the same time, I heard a sound. A faint vibration shook my eardrums before suddenly changing into an earthshaking tremor.

—It was familiar, somehow.

“No way...an Ebru boar?! So all those small fry were just buyin’ time to call that!”

“And it sounds like three of ‘em too! What do we do, big bro? Free-for-alls ‘n clever tactics’re a fighter’s work, right?!”

Sure, but we were up against three witch-controlled Ebru boars. On top of that, they were each coming from a different direction, charging toward the three currently performing sorcery. If we didn’t leave the smaller prey, we wouldn’t make it to deal with the boars, but if we did, we would be leaving the sorcerers defenseless.

—In that case.

“I’ll kill two of those boars. You stay here, keep guardin’ ‘em ‘n, take down the last one!”

Without waiting for so much as a yes, I ran off in the direction of the noise. I climbed up the nearest tree and waited on a branch for the noise to pass by. Gauging out an appropriate time, I

leapt into the vicinity of the Ebru boar's snout. As it tried its hardest to shake me off, I wrapped a rope around its struggling muzzle, straining every muscle in my body as I pulled.

"Stop strugglin'! Just be good 'n change direction...!"

Letting out a shrill cry, the Ebru boar reared its head and changed the direction it was charging in. —There was another Ebru boar where it was headed. I wondered what would happen to an Ebru boar, moving with enough force to smash down large trees, if another charging boar just like it crashed sidelong into it—.

Just before the collision, I jumped from the Ebru boar's snout and rolled on the ground. A sound like two boulders colliding rang out, and then stillness descended. I got up from the ground. The two Ebru boars that had collided were foaming at their mouths, unconscious, but didn't seem to have suffered any life-threatening injuries. They probably wouldn't wake up for a while, but they were unbelievably sturdy. It was probably thanks to that thick layer of fat under their skin.

"...I ain't got time to deal the final blow."

They seemed delicious, but now wasn't the time. I hurried back to the magic circle—and crashed into Dog-Face, who had taken the Ebru boar's charge head-on and was sent flying.

"Ow...that hurt, ya dumb dog! Ya can't even deal with one of 'em on your own?!"

"Don't be so unreasonable! They might be amateurs, but it's an army of twenty of 'em! I can't hold 'em all back and take on an Ebru boar all at the same time! I ain't a fighter!"

*So this is how good the former knight is. I'm sorry for expecting anything.*

To make matters worse, the final boar was a tough, veteran warrior. And on top of that, when I saw that its left eye was blind, I realized it was probably the boar Albus'd sent after Zero and I.

*Ain't this a reunion.*

Without even pausing for my greeting, the boar eyed Dog-Face and me, and came straight for us.

"Aim for the feet! I've got the right! You get the left! —Run, Dog-Face!"

"How many times do I gotta tell ya I'm a wolf?! Fuckin' cut it out already!"

Enveloping our angry roars, Albus' voice resounded through the air.

"Earth, water, fire, wind, sky. O blessed rulers of this present age. O those changing, rooted, and flowing."

Calm and warm, that voice was unfittingly gentle and solemn for the situation.

How could she speak like this when her voice was normally so shrill?

Wondering, I ducked low to the ground while running and severed the boar's leg from its body. A fallen beast's strength combined with the force of an Ebru boar's charge could snap even tough bone in two. Giving a piercing cry, the boar rolled on its back. I pressed my sword to roughly where its heart would be—and stabbed down with all my might.

The tip of the sword sliced through thick fat and compact muscle, reaching its powerful beating heart, and tore through.

The Ebru boar stretched its tail out straight and screeched until its last, then passed away.

Simultaneously—

“For as long as my life lingers. For as long as his strength persists. You shall bear this power within you!”

Albus prostrated herself on the ground. In the space of a second, as if from nothing, something indistinct came into existence around her.

I could barely make out the shapes of humans, but—

“Are those—“

“They're the spirits that oversee Wenias. Well, they're all demons when it comes to sorcery though. We did it, big bro. We won.”

Dog-Face answered my question as he cleaned the blood off his sword.

Albus broke into a grin as if relieved that the ritual was a success, and looked toward Thirteenth with pride. Protecting Zero and Albus with his magic-sealing bounded field, Thirteenth didn't even blink at her gaze.

—Instead, he nodded once. That was probably the biggest compliment Thirteenth could give.

Zero raised both arms then, and shouted sonorously. Her voice was deafening and strong compared to Albus', crushingly rich and heavy.

“O my nameless sovereign of demons. Descend upon the body of this sacrificial beast and hear me!”



Zero's voice resounded in my head. All the blood in my body grew warm as if boiling, and a headache struck, pain so intense I could barely open my eyes. I collapsed under the agony.

"I hereby declare! From here on to perpetuity, for all those who walk upon this land, I reject all magic to which my power extends!"

For a moment, there was silence.

"—Sanction this! I declareth myself Zero!"

My breathing stopped for an instant. I writhed under the pain and agony, and clutched at the ground.

A ferocious beast, teeth bared, flew past me and raced savagely toward Zero.

*Shit, Zero's—*

I somehow managed to turn my head, but as the beast entered my sight, it halted and burst open.

Immediately the pain receded, and my senses dulled. A syrupy sensation stole over me, and I could no longer see.

—Darkness.

And then I lost consciousness. Somewhere. Far away.

***"I sanction this. How long it has been, my dearest—"***

I thought I heard such a voice.

## **Final Chapter: Magic Authorization**



# 終章 魔法免許

## Part 1

When I awoke, I found myself on a bed. Sluggishly, I rose from the bed feeling weighed down by fatigue, and Zero came into view snuggled into a chair, a book in her hands.

“You’re awake? What a relief. How do you feel, Mercenary?”

“Hm...I feel like I was possessed by a demon.”

Zero laughed.

“The demon returned your body as happily as could be, but you slept for an additional three days. I suppose you two were simply too compatible. The people have already received word from the kingdom of the downfall of the ‘evil witches’, and have begun a patriotic celebration. You should have heard the cries of the wayward sorcerers as they realized they had lost their magic.”

Oh, I could imagine how very miserable they were.

“I figure the desperate ones fought back.”

“Sure, but as ordinary humans, they are nothing to fear. The dog also proved unexpectedly helpful. Our problem now lies beyond the bounded field; namely, those who are astute enough to realize that outside of Wenias, magic is still perfectly accessible. Another stormy cloud looms on the horizon in the form of those who have discovered their ability to perform sorcery, and who have commenced their research.”

Then it seemed that the eradication of magic would be only temporary, and confined to the bounds of Wenias. Every single witch in the world would just put their own knowledge to work coming up with new magics.

What a pain in the ass. The world was a big place, and having only Thirteenth and Albus in Wenias meant almost all the rest was all but laid bare before magic. There would be more incidents like Wenias, and possibly further tales of tragedy.

“That child has begun to pick out those with magical promise, teaching them sorcery and magic in preparation for future operations whose purpose will be to root out such headaches. Wenias shall sponsor this venture as a kingdom, making it the very first nation of sorcerers, just as Thirteenth had intended.”

“A nation of sorcerers...it’s got a frightenin’ ring to it. Where’s Thirteenth, anyway?”

“Waiting in the dungeons for his turn at the stake.”

I looked at Zero with disbelief. It simply sounded too serious to be a joke.

“That’s how it is. But of course, it’s all smoke and mirrors. It’s the final performance of Thirteenth, the man who played the fool’s role as the sorcerer of righteousness, and ignited war between the

witches and the kingdom. That child will go down in history as the one who exposed and defeated Thirteenth, the mastermind behind all of this.”

“Mhm...so she’s making a mutual enemy out of him for the play of coexistence?”

I gazed up at the ceiling, sighing as I did. Everything had been arranged by Thirteenth, and everyone had been deceived by the evil of one man. That belief would make it much easier for the humans, who had burned the innocent Solena to death, and the witches, who had begun the uprising, to make the first steps toward unity.

“So we’ll have the evil sorcerer Thirteenth, and the granddaughter of the great Solena who thwarted his schemes? That’s a real fairytale that’ll go down in history.”

“Though the child’s use of Thirteenth’s help in settling the uprising does complicate matters.”

Zero laughed, putting down her book, and offered me a cup of water. I took it gratefully and gulped down the liquid as Zero plopped herself onto my bed.

“—Morning, Mercenary. I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Uh...ah...”

“Oh, right. There is still one issue remaining...but I have finally reclaimed my book.”

“Well congrats. Now I—“

“Can’t be human again.”

*Did I hear something just now? No, it was probably only a figment of my imagination. Please let that have been only my imagination.*

“I will need some time to recover. My battle with Thirteenth and the grand magic-sealing bounded field were able to drain even my bottomless reservoir of magical power.”

*Dammit, it wasn’t just my imagination.* I took my head in my hands.

“Were you a fallen beast of your own accord like Dog-Face, I could easily return your human form...but as you have been one since birth, your human soul and the animal soul within you are strongly fused. Separating the two would already require its own share of power, not to mention the fact that your possession by the demon only seemed to strengthen the bond.”

“Seemed ta strengthen...bullshit! Who d’ya think got me possessed in the first place?!”

“I may have, but I feel upset for you, too. I tried various things to turn you human once more while you slept, until your fur fell out...that was a nightmare. I hurriedly turned you normal again.”

“What the hell’d ya do to me while I was out?!”

“It wasn’t on purpose. I had Thirteenth try as well, but he was also quite exhausted...”

“Right, got it. Let’s talk practicalities then. How long’s it gonna take for your magic ta recover? A month? A year?”

Mm, Zero jerked her head in affirmation, looking blankly off in another direction.

“I don’t know.”

“Why don’t ya just tell me instead of hidin’ shit?! What about our agreement, huh?!”

“I haven’t denied my end of the agreement, but only indicated that you must wait a while.”

“No debtor, no matter how honest, would listen ta stupid shit like that!”

“Well, don’t say that. You only need to continue being my guard. Your current physique is well suited to being an escort, and I find your beast appearance quite adorable. Your fur makes for a warm and pleasant blanket, and most importantly, you won’t have anyone else besides yours truly to seek answers from in that form. This way, I won’t be lonely.”

*How could she say all that with a straight face...*

I glimpsed Zero through the gaps between my digits.

Her charm was as unrivaled as always. She seemed to have been living in this room, waiting for my awakening. Around the chair she had occupied were blankets and the like, all scattered around. —*Forgive me, but this ain’t exactly something I’m supposed ta celebrate.*

“...Guard ya? You’re gonna go someplace else?”

“Yes, I want to go somewhere. I’ve spent far too long in my cave. Tales are told of trees that are composed of jewels, of rivers that flow through the air, of fish that swim in the sand, and of birds that subsist on lightning. I would like to see those things, but it is dangerous for a witch to travel alone in this age.”

I smiled at the faintly nostalgic words. *Dammit, I smiled—stupid.*

Well...since I was a money-grubbing mercenary anyway, I thought it would be far better to be a witch’s guard than a man-slaughtering machine on the battlefield. More importantly, there would be a contract between the two of us until I was human again, even when the scars on our thumbs were healed. My answer then came to me. I scratched at the back of my neck.

“So? Just what’ll I get for escortin’ ya?”

“Mercenaryyy! Zerooo! Get this! Thirteenth’s being so annoying about the ‘play’. He just keeps going on and on about things like our lines at the stake and the stage.”

I was ravenous after three days of sleep, and so a giant boar—an Ebru boar, whole roasted to boot—was prepared for my meal.

The gigantic and imposing roast boar sat magnificently at the center of the table, and before it sat Dog-Face, Zero, Albus and I. Thirteenth was supposedly in the dungeons, but Thirteenth was Thirteenth no matter where he happened to be.

Listening to Zero laugh at Albus' complaints about Thirteenth, I tore into the meat. There was already its status as a high-class ingredient, but the boar itself was also unbelievably tender, the sweetness of its fat filling my mouth as I sank my teeth into its flesh. The bits around the bone were just as superb, and the meat's flavor alone was appetizing enough.

"Don't be so cross. There is no one more proficient than Thirteenth at manipulating the hearts of others. He's trying to hand Wenias over to you as it is, in an optimal state. Think of it as a lesson on grasping people's hearts, on top of shouldering the burdens of the nation as a witch of the Lunar Chant."

"Whaaa? But if I learn from Thirteenth, I'll end up all creepy and devious."

"Little lady here's actually always hated learning. Even Solena'd no idea what to do with her," Dog-Face muttered earnestly with a tinge of nostalgia, when he suddenly yelped and fell off his chair. Albus must have yanked his tail. *Your fur's all grown back thanks to Zero's magic, but you're just as pathetic as always, ain't ya, Dog-Face.*

Zero broke into shrill laughter again as she saw that, and bit into some fatty boar meat just as I did.

One week later, when I could move normally again, Thirteenth had been immolated, and Albus had been acknowledged as the leader of the state sorcerers' league—Solena's Flame—by the populace, Zero and I decided to take our leave.

And so, just as the sun was beginning its ascent, we were waiting at the outskirts of Prasta.

As we needed to allow Thirteenth to escape secretly, we hid ourselves from view and made for the forest. The moist early morning air of the forest was cool, and there was not a hint of human presence nearby. There was a small incident when Albus had clung to my waist, pleading with us not to leave and to stay forever, but Dog-Face managed to calm her down and get her off, and besides that, our departure was as smooth as silk.

"Come play again soon! I'd go with you guys, but I'm a witch of the Lunar Chant..."

I patted Albus' head as she was still sniffing and promised her we'd be back in no time. The fact that we'd met when she attacked me, trying to take my head for herself, seemed to be absent from her memory. *It's not like I got a grudge or anything against her though—well, it's complicated.*

The truth of Solena's attempt to cleanse the plague had been promulgated across Wenias, and in the blink of an eye, witches were no longer the targets of fear and prejudice.

There was already groundwork laid for coexistence, and there must have been a sentiment to atone for Solena's wrongful death. The populace accepted Albus' position as the sorcerer of justice surprisingly easily, and although there certainly remained various unresolved issues, the crisis of the witches' revolt in Wenias could be considered over. From now on, only those witches who receive Albus' *Authorization* may use magic within the borders of Wenias, and the plan seemed to be to use the newly established and officially recognized state sorcerers, along with the so-called Magic Authorization system, to purge the witches dispersed outside the nation.

Under the pretense of scouting for that purpose, we were issued special passes which would allow us to just about freely travel into and out of other nations. Wenias prospered as a layover spot for traffic between nations, after all, so it did hold influence over even admission to foreign nations.

Thirteenth was going to return to his cave in the Forest of the Bowed Moon. A few witches who had looked up to Thirteenth as their mentor in Wenias would be accompanying him as his pupils. Only three had been told that Thirteenth's immolation was only a masquerade, and those three were waiting quietly for Thirteenth somewhere else.

Zero had mentioned that though Thirteenth was returning to the Forest of the Bowed Moon, he had left behind "eyes" all over Wenias to watch for any resistance from witches. That way, he could do his best to counsel Albus even from far off.

The title of "witch" was also from now on to be replaced by that of "magician". The reason appeared to be that if gender was not taken out of the equation, some bothersome misunderstandings would arise as a result.

That didn't mean that the use of the titles "witch" and "sorcerer" would fade so simply however, but disregarding one's gender, if one used magic, then one was a magician.

"Zero, do you really not want to return to the cave with me?"

I was struggling under the weight of an enormous pack full of foodstuffs Zero had crammed in, when Thirteenth raised his question in as an emotionless voice as always.

"No, I don't, Thirteenth. I will be traveling with Mercenary."

"Zero, *I*<sup>6</sup>—"

Thirteenth opened his mouth to say something, but Zero silently hushed him.

---

6 Thirteenth uses *Wagahai* here instead of his usual *Watashi*. Zero has always used *Wagahai*, a rather archaic and almost arrogant pronoun to refer to herself, and she ridiculed Thirteenth for no longer using it since he left their cave. Thus is the significance of this word, as it is almost as if Thirteenth reverts to his pre-Wenias self, reminding Zero of days past.

"I'll be taking my leave, Thirteenth."

She poked Thirteenth in the chest, then turned her back and walked off. I tried to follow, but something held me back.

"What?" I inquired, and when I turned around, there was Albus' face intimately close to mine. Something met my lips. Dog-Face yelled.

"You bastard! My big bro you might be, but I ain't gonna let you take little lady!"

"Huh? Wha? Wait, the hell—"

Albus had already run away laughing, leaving me flustered and Dog-Face raging. I couldn't even chase after her, as Zero was quite far ahead at this point, and I was going to be left behind if I didn't get going.

"Ah, shit! I've got no idea what's goin' on, but it ain't my fault!" Shouting, I ran after Zero.

## Part 2

*What the heck was that? What did she want to accomplish? What was the meaning of that? I clasped my mouth as I made my way toward Zero. I felt awkward for some reason, so I followed half a step behind her.*

"You kissed the girl, didn't you?"

Zero did not mince her words. I fell to my knees, feigning calm as agonizing turmoil raged within. So that was a kiss. *How could I let my first get stolen away by that kid?!*

"...I didn't."

I lied coolly. I didn't do the kissing anyway, so the correct description would be that I *was* kissed.

"No, you did."

"You didn't see it, did ya?! How could ya know?!"

"I'm a witch, Mercenary."

That didn't explain anything at all, but it was strangely persuasive. I scratched the back of my neck and mumbled a response.

"Well...you two didn't make a big deal out of your thing! You wanted to be with Thirteenth, didn't ya? Ain't that why you came all the way to Wenias for him?"

I went off on a completely unrelated topic.

“Perhaps,” Zero murmured, glancing at me.

“Well, things have changed. Thirteenth and I have been a pair for a long time, but that was because I had no one else but him. Now, I have you.”

“Y...you ain’t interested in your old friend?”

Wanting to pave over my embarrassment, I adopted an accusatory tone. Zero laughed.

“Witches and sorcerers are basically so. Our long lives have made us rather coldhearted. If that were not the case, I would not have so simply forgiven Thirteenth’s murder of our master and comrades.”

“...Did ya forgive him?”

“Hm...I wonder. I may not have even been angry at first. Thirteenth touched on this, but almost all of the witches in the cave had, under the Muddy Black school of thought, become disabled. They were little more than breathing corpses, waiting for the sweet release of death. Their practice was one I shunned, and Thirteenth defeated. I think that he murdered them very tidily. It may have been his way of showing respect for the dead.”

Zero gazed at the distant sky, as if she longed for the past. Just like her words, neither her voice nor expression betrayed any hint of sorrow.

I couldn’t even begin to understand the thinking that death was liberation from life, but—

“Do you think it was cruel?”

“Who d’ya think you’re talkin’ to? I’m a mercenary, ya know? I’ve done plenty of things outta hate that got me soaked in blood from head to toe, way back when. I ain’t so great that I can complain about someone else’s morals.”

“...If that’s the case, why save Thirteenth? It shouldn’t have bothered you at all if I had slain him.”

“Why...”

*My body just moved on its own* was clearly not an explanation of any sort. I simply felt it wasn’t right to kill him. Zero killing Thirteenth, especially, I felt I had to stop, no matter the cost.

Suddenly, I felt understanding bloom within me, along with indescribable inner conflictedness.

I wondered if I was just making excuses for what I did or what, but my reasoning was probably thus.

“—Weren’t ya in love with Thirteenth?”

*My final peer, and only brethren.* Even thinking back on it now, the way Zero spoke about Thirteenth held special affection. Would she hurry to deny it, or would she calmly nod and

acknowledge it? I chanced a sidelong look at her, and saw her looking at me with a frown and a complex expression.

“What?”

“...You seem to be misunderstanding, Mercenary.”

“Misunderstanding?”

“Thirteenth is my elder brother.”

It was rather common as a saying to claim one’s eyes were popping out of their sockets. But right then, in my shock, I felt that my eyes actually were in danger of falling from their sockets.

Thirteenth was Zero’s—what now?

“The hell ya are! How can ya get siblings this unlike?! Besides, ya didn’t even say a word—“

“I did say so. I clearly stated that we are brethren, if I recall.”

She had indeed. She had said that they were brethren, and I knew the word “brethren” originally meant people born from the same womb. However, “brethren” was usually used to describe one’s comrades. Thus it was absurd to expect me to understand that they were siblings.

“And despite his looks, Thirteenth’s a handsome man whom even demons envy, though he traded his charms away when summoning a high-ranking demon.”

“Are charms somethin’ you can trade?”

“He traded them away, and became like so. But now I see... so you decided on the spur of the moment that you had to prevent me from killing the one I loved?”

I felt strangely itchy at that. As I scowled, Zero’s shoulders shook in joy.

“I see you put your life on the line for me. For the invisible and inedible thing known as my heart.”

“My body just moved on its own, it’s not like I thought that deeply ‘bout it.”

“So, Mercenary. Have you fallen for me?”

“ ‘Course I haven’t!”

Probably. No, most certainly not.

“You are so stubborn. Then what if I told you I have fallen for you? What would you do then?”

“Sorry, but I hate witches.”

I stuck out my tongue as I answered, as Zero simply blinked in puzzlement. Then she laughed.

“Still as cold as always, I see. You won’t bend even slightly, though my beauty is without rival. Thus, mercenary, I decided on something the moment you fell from the ceiling then.”

“...Decided on...?”

“Making you my manservant.”

I stopped walking and looked at Zero.

“...Huuuh?”

“By that I mean I will bind you to me by your name, and make you mine for all eternity. So, come now, give me your name at once!” Zero exclaimed, and on her face emerged a flawless smile which nobles the world over would prostrate themselves before. I turned away slowly from her beaming face, and—

—ran away with all my might. *This ain’t good. I knew witches’re scary.*

“Mercenary, don’t run now! Things are more convenient as a manservant! I’m one who treats them well, too! Mercenary, get back here! Don’t make me run, I’ll get sweat everywhere!”

“Ya think I care?! You’re a witch ’n all, just fly!”

“Such large-scale sorcery is easier said—ah!”

Zero fell clumsily flat onto the ground. *Urgh*, I let out a strange guttural noise and hurried back.

“Ya idiot! Ya can’t go runnin’ and talkin’ like that when you haven’t exercised in forever! What if ya bit your tongue—“

—what’d ya do then, I tried to finish, but Zero’s arm suddenly coiled around my neck before I could.

“I’ve got you now, Mercenary.”

*Mwahahaha*, she laughed in a diabolical manner. It seemed it had all just been an act.

*Dammit, I’ve been had. What’d I come rushing back for anyway? I’m so stupid.*

“Mercenary, your name.”

“Not tellin’.”

“How about I tell you mine?”

“I don’t really care about names.”

“Are you really that opposed to being mine?”

“I’m already your mercenary anyway, aren’t I?”

Sighing, I gathered Zero up. *Hm*, Zero made a noise as if she had come to an understanding, and rested her head on my shoulder as she observed the sky. The skies were clear and blue as always.

“Hey, Mercenary.”

“What, Witch?”

“I think I like that you are a beast warrior. You hate witches, and so are not seduced by my beauty. I am quite bitter about that, yet feel surprisingly satisfied. You have been my first and only friend.”

*Friend, huh? I see.* She, too, had been my first and only. Well, I didn’t feel disappointed.

I cleared my throat lightly, and looked up toward the soaring blue expanse.

“Well, I’d like you better if you were human, at least.”

“Then I would just be a normal girl and fearful of you. I would be dead already, in fact.”

Yes, I guess so.

If I weren’t a fallen beast.

If Zero weren’t a witch.

If our paths were to cross then, we would simply have continued on our merry ways. Such was the very reason why I called Zero witch, and she called me mercenary.

“Well...I suppose I can stay a fallen beast a little bit longer...”

“Hear hear,” Zero smiled.

The sky was sapphire and pristine as could be, and the path forward stretched onward with no end in sight. I, who was used to wandering between nations looking for battlefields, couldn’t even imagine what lay ahead.

Zero must have felt the same as well. As she rested in my arms, enthusiastically perusing the map and appearing more childish than Albus, I forced myself to put Thirteenth’s parting words out of mind.

*—If Zero were to come to hate this world,*

*—everything would be destroyed. Take care.*

I shook my head, dislodging the echo from my ears.

At any rate, it was far too late.

With Wenias as the origin, magic had likely already spread across the land. It had been a decade since Thirteenth brought magic to Wenias, so of course magic would have been taken elsewhere

as well. In that case, Zero was needed no matter what was to be done. Thirteenth must have known this, and thus chose to part with her.

Zero would protect the world from magic, and I the world from Zero. For now, such an arrangement would be enough, overlooking the unusual fact that Zero was the stronger of the two of us.

Zero and I.

I didn't know for how much longer we would remain together, but—

—for that very reason, well, this just might be the perfect degree of separation for the two of us.

## Afterword

Nice to meet you everyone, this is Kakeru Kobashiri.

I am honored and humbled to have been named Grand Prize winner of the twentieth Dengeki Novel Taishō. To be completely honest, I had mused about how incredibly cool it would be to win, but when the moment actually came, I felt a puzzling inner doubt that cried *there must have been some kind of mistake! This has to be a joke they're pulling on me!*

I have a naturally easy-to-scare, negative personality. Thus, I am glad to receive encouraging tidings.

So, did you enjoy *Zero Kara Hajimeru Mahou no Sho*? Personally, I'd like if it were called something along the lines of the Book of Zero, or look, it's that thing with the witch and the beastman.

Isn't the beastman great? He's so fluffy. I'm a big fan of non-human characters, but unfortunately, they're almost always driven into minor supporting roles. *I'll be the cuckoo<sup>7</sup> that writes one, then*, I thought, and this work was the result. During editing, Mercenary very nearly ended up as a human instead, but one way or another managed to remain a beast-person. It was a huge gamble to have a beast-person as the main character, and I thought there would be no choice but to revise my decision, but I'm glad that we stuck to it in the end. I'm very grateful to my audacious editor for that.

As of the writing of this afterword, I still don't know what kinds of cool illustrations will be included, and so I'm very excited and fidgety. And in a series of various miracles/and in another miracle, Satou Tsutomu-san will be writing the commentary. I would like to take time now to express from the heart my deepest, most sincere gratitude toward Shizuma-san and Satou-san.

Now, I am that sure that everyone is already aware, but besides the protagonist being non-human, this story is your typical "swords and magic" fantasy story. You have your witches and their incantations, mercenaries and their sword-fighting, conflicts between the hero and heroine, and battle with the final boss.

I love such tried and true stories. Add in just a dash of romance as a cherry on top, and I couldn't be any happier.

---

7 The cuckoo is strongly associated in Japanese culture with longing, melancholy, and mourning, which has its roots in the fable of emperor Du Yu of the Shu dynasty. Legend states that after death, Du Yu was reincarnated as a cuckoo who would chirp sharply to alert farmers of the coming of planting season. After learning of the destruction of his nation, the ancient Shu, at the hands of the Qin, the cuckoo that was Du Yu grieved that he wanted to go home. This grieving birdsong [too redundant?] continued as blood trickled from his beak, and that is given as a reason for why cuckoos' beaks are red.

There wasn't a moment when I didn't enjoy myself as I wrote this story, and I must admit, Thirteenth and Albus were especially fun to write! The cross-dressing *bokukko*<sup>8</sup> and gloomy, eccentric sorcerer dominate my top three favorite character types.

There was actually quite a bit of closeness in Dog-Face and Solena's relationship, but of course this was even more so for Mercenary and Zero's. When the two of them are put together in a scene, they converse without end.

As I thought about writing this and that, the manuscript became forty pages longer than the version I had submitted to the contest, and so I had to again frantically cut down the length from there.

I am repeatedly grateful to everyone who was involved in the making of this book for dealing with the great bother that was the poor quality of my outline.

And most importantly, I must thank everyone who perused this book! Truly, thank you so very much, and please treat me well.

I would be overjoyed if I was able to share even a bit of the happiness that I felt writing this book with you, the reader.

---

8 Female who uses the pronoun "boku" to refer to herself.

# Commentary

## **A tale of good in a world of sin.**

This novel is fun.

*Are there no other words necessary to describe this work? If instead I were to promulgate sophisms, would that not simply be worse?* If I am to be quite honest, I am indeed apprehensive so. However, as I have been bestowed the honor of writing a commentary on this piece, I believe what is meant is for me to chronicle but a few of my personal thoughts on this work.

The stage of this story is set in a sinful, foolish world beyond saving. There reside demons, probably gods as well, but it is undoubtedly an unsightly human world. Its mysteries are not those that bring about dreams, but those that bring about nightmares. It is a society that made an innocent boy give up hope of living a human life, by no fault of his own. It is an era in which a noble woman, trying to save lives, became the victim of a witch hunt.

Nevertheless, this work is overflowing with human kindness. Our protagonist is a victim of unreasonable circumstances, someone who has plenty of reason to resent society. Yet even as he laments his condition, resigns himself to his fate, and is guilty of overall cynicism, he remains a righteous person. Even our heroine, whose creation threw a nation into disarray and shook the world, a certain child, who for extremely selfish reasons attempted the murder of our protagonist, and a certain man who deceived his own relative, killed his own brethren, and hoodwinked all of his admiring followers. They and the protagonist are all fragrant with human kindness. I felt that this is what makes this tale feel so refreshing, and also what lends it its depth of flavor that keeps it so fresh.

To preempt any misunderstanding, however, I will add that this work is a novel written for amusement, not a treatise meant for education. I may say it countless times, but this is a fun novel. I can't help but smile as I read about the strange heroine, the frivolous sub-heroine, the gutsy yet young supporting character, the final boss I can think of only as mad, and the rather plebeian protagonist with his bloody vocation. The final battle I pieced together from careful foreshadowing, not knowing there was in fact a spiked pitfall lying in wait.

With all of that being said, I have a personal request to make. Please read this work as a work of entertainment first. Then read it once more, but savor the humanity of our protagonist and company, who were born in this wicked world. Once you have done so, this adventure alone will not be enough. I am sure that you will want to see more of their journey.

On that note, please be sure to continue on with this story.

An out-of-place fan letter,

Tsutomu Satou<sup>9</sup>

---

9 Author of “The Irregular at Magic High School” or “Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei”